

Ishpolkom, the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast regional government building in Khorog, with a statue of Lenin in the foreground. (Photo: J.-L. Ray, AKDN).



Members of the Shirev (Darvaz) Village Organisation at a meeting. The Village Organisation programme mobilises human, physical and financial resources to empower local villagers. (Photo: J.-L. Ray, AKDN).



## SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN TRANSITION

# Towards pluralism: Challenges for governance and civil society

Thomas Breu and Hans Hurni

Historically, the population of Gorno Badakhshan has felt indebted to socialism, as instituted by Lenin, for enhancing their standard of living. At the same time, the political system imposed by the Soviets was much less accepted here than elsewhere. This may seem ironic in light of the fact that various authors have reported that the Tajik communist apparatus was closer to the population in Gorno Badakhshan than in other parts of the Soviet Union (Kuzmin, 2001). Abuse of political power was vociferously criticised, and the ruling political elites were accused of betraying the principles of communism. However, the high standard of living achieved in Gorno Badakhshan appears to have appeased political discontent and prevented it from having any real consequences.

## The current political system

Based on its geographic location and distinct culture, Gorno Badakhshan has enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy since 1923. This was confirmed in 1995 after intense discussions at the national level by the Majlisi Oli (High Council). Today the government of the GBAO is made up of a number of state bodies directly subordinate to national authorities, and an *oblast* government that has the primary responsibility for coordination of public services provided directly to the local population.

The political system in the GBAO parallels the national political system. At the province (*oblast*) level, the executive is headed by the governor and 4 deputies. The governor is directly nominated by the Tajik President and heads the *oblast* administration with a staff of 40 persons. His duties are to implement the decisions made by the *majlisi* (council) of National Deputies (Province Deputies) and to enforce instructions from the Tajik Republic. A system similar to the one at the *oblast* level can be found in the 8 districts (including Khorog City, which has the same status), where district chairmen hold the executive power and district *majlisis* the legislative power. At the local level, the so-called *jamoats*<sup>1</sup> are headed by a chairman and report directly to the district *hukumat* (administration). It is interesting to note that the president of the Tajik Republic also nominates the district chairmen directly.

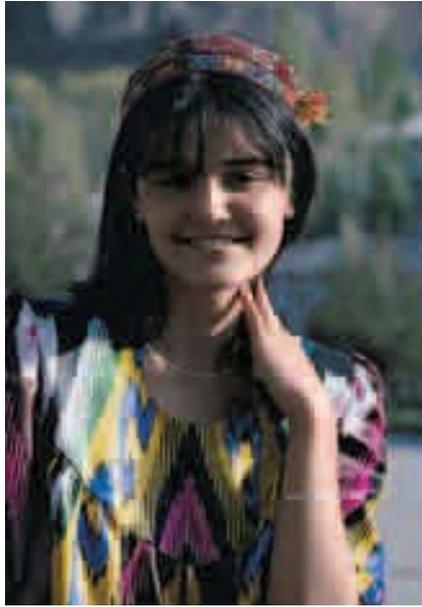
Despite a certain amount of autonomy, which is clearly greater than that in the other Tajik provinces, key functions in the GBAO are controlled by the central government. In addition to nomination of local political leaders, the central government requires the different *oblast* authorities to report directly to corresponding national agencies. Among these are the Department of Finance, the Control and Inspection Department, the Department of Water Economy, the Military Commissariat, the Department of Electro Power Stations, the Pamir Auto Transport Department, the Road Construction Department, the Water Sewage System, the Department of Municipal Economy, and the juridical organs and intelligence services.

The juridical and security system of the GBAO is characterised by a relatively large number of offices reporting directly to the corresponding higher bodies at the national level. At the *oblast* and district levels, regional courts and a regional prosecutor are in place for both civil and military prosecutions. In addition, at the *oblast* level, economic cases are handled by a court. The security and information network consists of the KGB, the Directorate of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs battalion, and the Drug Control Agency, all subordinated to the corresponding administrative units at the national level.

## Administration and CSOs

In 1997 the administration of Gorno Badakhshan spent a total of USD 3.086 million for services, or USD 15 per capita. Most of the 1997 *oblast* budget was provided by financial transfers from the central government (93%), whereas the remaining 7% was local income from taxes and fees within Gorno Badakhshan. As one of the largest relief and development organisations, the AFK-affiliated Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) has an annual budget nearly identical to that of the GBAO administration (USD 2.4 million in 2001). Although exact calculations of expenditures by other NGOs and international organisations in the GBAO are not available, it can be stated that the state budget is several times smaller than expenditures made for development cooperation. With only a minimal budget, the *oblast* and

**Under communist rule women enjoyed a high status in economic, familial and political affairs. An active role for women in the society and the economy will be essential for future development of the region. (Photo: D. Maselli)**



district administration cannot fulfil typical state functions. Local civil society organizations (CSOs) provide not only humanitarian assistance but education and public health care as well. Moreover, the MSDSP provides ongoing support for the community-building process through its Village Organisation programme.

As a consequence, parts of the local population turned their backs on the official state bodies in favour of the CSOs and their institutions. Despite intensified cooperation between development organisations and state institutions, there remains a certain risk that a competitive dual system will evolve at the village level and negatively influence the capacity of the state to take action and assume liability.

## Civil society and gender aspects

The sovietisation of Central Asia, while imposing a degree of communist orthodoxy, did not lead to the destruction of local culture and religion: the region was far from the centre of power and comprised a large number of rural communities where traditions remained strong. In addition, the government in Moscow found it politically advantageous to pay a certain amount of lip service to the concept of the the Soviet Union's "multicultural identity". However, with the breakdown of the Soviet-imposed system, the local political system was often paralysed, and no suitable institutions capable of coordinating and channelling local efforts were in place.

With the start of the humanitarian efforts undertaken by the agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), Village Organizations (VOs) were created in almost all villages by the MSDSP. Today there are more than 400 such organisations, with 45,000 members, extending to over 95% of the rural households in the GBAO. Initially established to facilitate the distribution of food aid, the VOs gradually shifted to a broader economic horizon concerned with more far-reaching activities than solely providing food aid and focusing on food self-sufficiency. Today the philosophy of the AKF and the MSDSP is that rural economic development is best catalysed and sustained through village-level institutions that are autonomous and transparent, and ultimately contribute to democracy. Against this background, decision-making on development-relevant village affairs is negotiated at VO meetings, where different subgroups can actively take part or comment on the management of the organisations. This kind of open dialogue fosters broad participation for development at the community level.

In phases of transition, gender aspects must be carefully observed, as fundamental transitions in society often disadvantage the female population (Kanji & Gladwin 1999). The combination of the rather liberal Ismaeli religion and communist principles of gender equality resulted in a comparatively high status for women. With the dissolution of the Soviet system, the position of women in economic, family and political affairs changed, frequently resulting in a diminished status. Women were the first to lose their jobs and other opportunities to earn income, and they have become more dependent on relatives during the recent decade. They have increasingly withdrawn to their homes and participate less in political affairs. To reverse this trend, the MSDSP

is making special efforts to enhance women's participation in the development process. A large number of micro-enterprise projects are being supported by numerous women's groups. These projects aim to increase women's income and their control over their own financial resources, and are intended to help women integrate themselves into emerging local markets.

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<sup>1</sup> A *jamoat*, the smallest political entity, is composed of 5 to 20 villages. Currently Gorno Badakhshan has 45 registered *jamoats* in 8 districts (including Khorog City), comprising a total of 386 villages and towns.