Exclusion, Enmity, and the Normalization of the Exception: The September 2015 Incidents and the Development of Sovereign Dictatorship in Tajikistan

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Abstract

The armed rebellion of Deputy Defense Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda in September 2015 was a critical moment in the post-war history of Tajikistan. The rebellion, which the government blamed on the Islamic Renaissance Party, formed the justification for the Supreme Court to classify the party as a terrorist organization and arrest its leadership. While the government framed the events as a coup attempt, supported by the IRPT, the narrative had inconsistencies and Nazarzoda had been loyal to the state since the end of the civil war. Using the ideas of Carl Schmitt, who argued that sovereignty lies in the ability of a strong executive to monopolize decision-making, define when there is an emergency, and how to resolve it. In this case, president Rahmon used the the sense of emergency and threat created by the "coup" attempt to dismantle the IRPT and then have himself legally declared "Leader of the Nation."

Keywords

Tajikistan – authoritarianism – conflict – security – Carl Schmitt – politics

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In the early morning of September 4, 2015, gunmen attacked police stations and checkpoints in Vahdat and Dushanbe, leaving at least nine officers dead. Deputy Defense Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda, also known as Hoji Halim, orchestrated the attacks as a "coup attempt" according to the government. Following the initial attacks, Nazarzoda fled with a few dozen supporters to the mountainous Romit gorge, 120 miles north-east of Dushanbe. After a lengthy counter-insurgency operation, law enforcement killed Nazarzoda on the afternoon of September 16. 27 militants died and approximately 140 were detained in the operation. The regime lost 18 law enforcement officers, including the commander of the special operations group of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan, Colonel Rustam Amakiyev. Nazarzoda was killed along with his ally Junaidullo Umarov, head of the Department of Military Inspection of the Ministry of Defense.

The events of September 2015 were a critical moment for Tajikistan's politics; they formed the death knell of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the country's leading opposition party.[1] The IRPT, which had held two seats in parliament since it was legalized in 1999, had come under government pressure for a number of years. The government's campaign intensified in early 2015, resulting in the party losing its two seats in parliament, then getting banned by the Supreme Court in August. The Tajik government claimed that General Nazarzoda had acted on the orders of the IRPT with the support of foreign countries to organize the alleged coup. The Supreme Court subsequently used the events as a justification to classify the party as a terrorist organization.

Almost five years have passed since these events, yet several questions remain. Who was Abduhalim Nazarzoda? Were the September 2015 events really a coup, as the government claimed? How can the IRPT's closure be linked to these incidents? This article is based on nine interviews with those connected with the events and an analysis of 67 articles in the state media, including *Khovar, Jumhuriyat, Minbari Khalq, Javonon, Qonun va Jomea*, as well as the websites of the President's Office, Ministry of Internal Affairs and ProsecUTOr General's Office.

While the government portrayed Nazarzoda's rebellion as a state-opposed coup, the 2015 events are better seen as the government's purge of a former insider in an intra-state conflict that emerged from contestations over access to the state and the loot that this provides. The events of 2015 were most likely

1 Emerging from a Qur'anic study group in 1973, the IRPT was legally established 1990 and formed part of the opposition during the country's civil war (1992–1997). The party was re- established as a legal political party as part of the Peace Accord, and participated in elections between 2000 and 2015.

the result of a tactical move by Nazarzoda to pre-empt action against him by other forces within the state. The government's response to the events fit a broader pattern of what Parviz Mullojonov and John Heathershaw have called "authoritarian conflict management" which relies on state repression, the centralization of power, and hierarchical order-building.2

We supplement this approach by theorizing the Tajik government's response through the thinking of anti-liberal scholar Carl Schmitt. Schmitt argued that sovereignty lies in the ability of a strong executive to monopolize decision-making, define when there is an emergency, and how to resolve it. Communities are defined by relations of enmity, contrasting themselves from their enemies. The sovereign Emomali Rahmon thus used the sense of emergency and threat created by the "coup" attempt by Nazarzoda to provide further proof of the position of the IRPT as the enemy of the Tajik nation, justifying the dismantlement of the group. While the government would have likely found a reason to classify the IRPT as a terrorist organization without Nazarzoda's rebellion, the 2015 events offered the government the perfect opportunity to do so. Shortly after these events, a new law made Rahmon "Leader of the Nation," rendering him legally immune. Subsequent changes to the constitution abolished the presidential term limit; a sovereign dictatorship, characterized by Schmitt as unlimited decision-making power to create a new constitutional order, was now enshrined in Tajikistan's law.

1 Authoritarian Conflict Management and Carl Schmitt

Tajikistan has achieved peace, but not a liberal peace. Peace emerged despite the breakdown of the power-sharing agreements which ended the civil war in 1997, the presence of widespread human rights violations, and as the government of Emomali Rahmon has concentrated power around a small inner circle, often related by blood and marriage.3 In recent years, some scholars have started to dedicate attention to authoritarian conflict management and illiberal peacebuilding.4 Ricardo de Oliviera argues in his study of post-conflict Angola

2 Parviz Mullojonov and John Heathershaw, "Rebels without a Cause? Authoritarian Conflict Management in Tajikistan, 2008–15," in *Tajikistan on the Move*: *Statebuilding and Societal Transformations*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (New York: Lexington, 2018), 33–61.

3 John Heathershaw, "Tajikistan's Virtual Politics of Peace," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no.7 (2009): 1315–1336.

4 See for example, David Lewis, "The Failure of a Liberal peace: Sri Lanka's Counter-insurgency in Global Perspective," *Conflict, Security & Development* 10, no.5 (2010): 647–71; Giulia Piccolino, "Winning Wars, Building (Illiberal) Peace? The Rise (and Possible Fall) of a Victor's Peace in Rwanda and Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no.9 (2015): 1770–85; Claire Smith,

that the government of Jose dos Santos, who held power from 1979 to 2017, ensured that there was not a revival of conflict creating an "elite-consensus focused on the limitation of popular mobilization, the strengthening of the state apparatus, and the construction of a stable but non-egalitarian political order."[5] The introduction to a recent special issue of *Conflict, Security & Development* identifies three common themes across the research on illiberal peacebuilding:[6] first, illiberal peacebuilding is driven by domestic actors and non-Western powers, unlike liberal peacebuilding; second, through corruption and cronyism, many of the economic benefits of the post-war order are captured by elites; and third, illiberal peacebuilding places emphasis on order and hierarchy rather than freedom and equality.

Tajikistan has been subject to illiberal peacebuilding since 1997. The 2015 events, however, are better understood through the related concept of *authoritarian conflict management*.[7] Authoritarian conflict management refers to approaches that rely on state repression and hierarchical order-building to attempt to manage internal armed conflicts. Resolution of these conflicts rests on sustaining a single-pyramid economy of rent distribution, the centralization of control over political space, and a stable discourse about politics in general and the conflict in particular. The concept of authoritarian conflict management can be fruitfully augmented by reference to Carl Schmitt. David Lewis, for example, outlines a Schmittian framework in a recent article on Sri Lanka to explain the emergence of an authoritarian political order during andafter conflict.[8]

Two aspects of Schmitt's thought help illuminate the dynamics of authoritarian conflict management in Tajikistan. First, Schmitt offered a model of

"Illiberal Peace-building in Hybrid Political Orders: Managing Violence during Indonesia's Contested Political Transition," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 8 (2014): 1509–28; John Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009).

5 Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "Illiberal peacebuilding in Angola," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 308.

6 Claire Smith, Lars Waldorf, Rajesh Venugopal and Gerard McCarthy, "Illiberal Peace-building in Asia: A Comparative Overview," *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no.1 (2020): 1–14.

7 David Lewis, Nick Megoran and John Heathershaw, "Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management," *Cooperation and Conflict* 53, no. 4 (2018): 486–506; Catherine Owen, Shairbek Juraev, David Lewis, Nick Megoran, and John Heathershaw, *Interrogating Illiberal Peace in Eurasia: Critical Perspectives on Peace and Conflict* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); David Lewis and Saniya Sagnayeva, "Corruption, Patronage and Illiberal Peace: Forging Political Settlement in Post-conflict Kyrgyzstan," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no.1 (2020): 77–95.

8 David Lewis, "Sri Lanka's Schmittian Peace: Sovereignty, Enmity and Illiberal Order," *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no.1 (2020): 15–37.

sovereignty whereby the ruler has a monopoly on decision-making.9 Schmitt, in contrast to those who believe the law takes primacy over the ruler's individual decisions, advocated for a strong executive power unhampered by constraints of legality. Schmitt explained this leader could, in times of emergency, bring about a total suspension of the law and use extra-legal means to normalize the situation; prior rules cannot determine the exception, or stipulate what constitutes an emergency. Schmitt did not believe the ruler's decision should be taken out of self-interest, or to advance the interests of a narrow elite, but it should reflect the prevailing social attitudes. Sovereignty, then, is not "the monopoly to coerce or to rule, but the monopoly to decide."10

Second, for Schmitt, politics is ultimately about distinguishing "between friend and enemy." Relations of enmity define and homogenize political communities. For Schmitt, "the political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping."11 Internal enemies who do not espouse the same views as the multitude should be repressed, eliminated or exiled. For Schmitt, the liberal dream of a pluralist order that incorporates different viewpoints is potentially destabilizing.

A sovereign dictator needs to act decisively, and extra-legally if necessary, to bring about order by addressing external threats. In essence, Schmitt argued for the "reestablishment and supremacy of the state."12 In the case of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, the sovereign dictator embodies the community's understanding of what is normal or exceptional, and of who belongs. Order is valued above all other political values. Politics are adversarial; they exist only when one collective of people confronts, or can confront, another. Schmitt, following in the footsteps of Machiavelli and Hobbes, advocated for realpolitik, the idea that "might makes right." The rule of law becomes an obstacle to be overcome rather than a principle to be honored. A Schmittian peace involves the construction of "an anti-pluralist and hierarchical politics, characteri[z]ed by the search for political order through centrali[z]ed, sovereign power within a homogeneous political community, and the demarcation of hard boundaries between communities, defined by enmity and otherness," all of which have occurred in Tajikistan.13 The next sections unpack the 2015 events and how they were framed by the government through a *Friend/Enemy discourse*.

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9 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

10 Ibid. 13.

11 Carl Schmitt. *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29.

12 Chantal Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (New York: Verso, 1999), 57.

13 David Lewis, "Sri Lanka's Schmittian Peace," 17.

2 The Events of September 2015

The September events signaled the end of the formal period of post-conflict reconciliation in Tajikistan, whereby the civil war-era opponents of the government, the IRPT, were allowed to play a role in national politics. On September 4, news about the alleged coup of Abduhalim Nazarzoda spread throughout Tajikistan. The Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that Nazarzoda and his men attacked the ministry's building in Vahdat, 20 miles east of Dushanbe, at 4:28 am local time, killing eight police officers and injuring two.14 Further armed clashes with security forces occurred later in the day near the Dushanbe International Airport. According to the ProsecUTOr General, 300 people were involved in the incidents, most of them former militants of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the coalition of forces that fought against the current government during the country's civil war (1992–1997). After the at- tack, Nazarzoda's group escaped to the Romit gorge located 80 miles from the capital. Nazarzoda was dismissed by a presidential decree on September 6 with the charge of "committing to criminal acts."15 On September 8, a criminal case was opened against him, with charges of treason (Article 305 of the Criminal Code), extremism (Article 307) and terrorism (Article 179).

The conflict in the Romit gorge lasted for eleven days. A joint staff including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) took responsibility for the negotiations and for ending the crisis. In the meantime, the state detained hundreds of citizens for supporting Nazarzoda.16 The state claimed that Nazarzoda and his men refused to negotiate. On September 16, the Tajik Special Forces launched an "anti-terrorist operation" in Gusgev, some 80 miles from Vahdat.17 The operation resulted in the death of Abduhalim Nazarzoda, along with 11 of his comrades and the arrest of a further 32 militants. The government seized 645 firearms and 64,445 rounds of ammunition from Nazarzoda's group.

14 "Тафсилоти ҳамлаҳои мусаллаҳона дар Душанбе ва Ваҳдат" [Details of the Armed Attacks in Dushanbe and Vahdat], Radio Ozodi, 4 September 2015, https://www .ozodi.org/a/27225792.html.

15 "Muovini barkanorşudai vaziri difo' ba Romit firor kardaast" [The ousted Deputy Defense Minister Fled to Romit], Radio Ozodi, 4 September 2015, https://www.ozodi.org/ a/27226809.html.

16 "vkd: 139 çonibdori Nazarzoda bozdoşt va 100 parvandai çinoī boz şud" [mia: 139 Nazarzoda Supporters Detained and 100 Criminal Cases Opened], Sputnik, 18 September 2015, https://sputnik-tj.com/Tajikistan/20150918/1016829314.html.

17 "vkd va kdam: amalijoti viza alajhi "generali firorī" ançom joft" [MIA and GKNB: Special Operation against "Fugitive General" Completed], Sputnik, 17 September 2015, https:// sputnik-tj.com/Tajikistan/20150917/1016807541.html.

The government also moved against the IRPT, which it had formally banned two weeks before. On September 17, the ProsecUTOr General accused IRPT leader Muhiddin Kabiri of ordering the attacks. The statement accused 13 other IRPT deputies of planning the attacks, including spokesman Hikmatullo Saifullozoda and deputy chairman Mahmadali Hait. Hait was arrested whilst trying to board a plane to Almaty on September 16. Security services detained First Deputy Chairman Saidumar Husayni on the same day. In total, over 200 members of the party were arrested in the weeks following the alleged coup.

Over 100 members of Nazarzoda's family and those of his group were detained.18 The practice of punishing family members for an individual's actions is similar to the Russian, and later Soviet, tradition of *krugovaia poruka*, often translated as "joint responsibility" or "circular control."19 Nazarzoda had six brothers; three of them died under mysterious circumstances. His eldest brother Mirzokarim, five years Abduhalim's senior, was a famous businessperson and known locally as a religious man. The government was aware of Mirzokarim's political and intellectual disagreements with Abduhalim. Halim's younger brother Abdurahim, who was mentally disabled, was also killed along with Mirzohayat, known as Hoji Hayat. The government claimed all three were killed as part of their brother's armed group.20 According to different theories, Halim was either killed in the office of the Sixth Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Dushanbe, or sent to Romit to negotiate the surrender of his brother, or asked to identify his brother's body and was then killed. Only his youngest brother, Jamoliddin, survived but was sentenced to ten years in pris- on.21 Later, his eldest son Bakhtiyor was sentenced to 22 years in prison for his involvement in the September 2015 events.22 In May 2018, four alleged supporters of Nazarzoda were arrested for plotting to attack the Office for Combating Organized Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (UBOP).23 The latest arrests

18 "Az kheşi general, to kheşi "terrorist". Jak soli nazdikoni Hoçī Halim" [From a Relative of a General to a Relative of a "Terrorist." A Year After Hoji Halim], Radio Ozodi, 4 September 2016, https://www.ozodi.org/a/relatives-of-former-tajik-general-one-year-after-his -coup/27965404.html.

19 Golfo Alexopoulos, "Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s-1940s," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no.1 (2008): 91–117.

20 Abdusatar Babaev (former member of IRPT Supreme Council) in discussion with the author, November 2018.

21 Ibid.

22 "Syn generala Nazarzoda prigovoren k 22 godam lisheniya svobody" [General Nazarzoda's Son was Sentenced to 22 years in Prison], Radio Ozodi, 9 May 2016, https://rus.ozodi.org/a/27724344.html.

23 "V Tadzhikistane zaderzhany chetvero uchastnikov vooruzhennogo myatezha Khodzhi Khalima" [Four Members of the Armed Rebellion of Hoji Halim Detained in Tajikistan], Avesta, 31 May 2018, http://avesta.tj/2018/05/31/v-tadzhikistane-zaderzhany-chetvero-uchastnikov-vooruzhennogo-myatezha-hodzhi-halima/.

came in June 2018, when Afghanistan extradited four of Nazarzoda's supporters who had been captured in Badakhshan.24

3 Friend/Enemy: Framing the "Coup"

Central to authoritarian conflict management is the monopolization of the discourse on the motives behind and dynamics of conflict.25 A number of previous studies have examined how Central Asian regimes have framed violent events.26 Nick Megoran, for example, explored how the government of Uzbekistan legitimized its response to, and how it de-legitimized alternative framings of, Andijon incidents in 2005. According to Megoran, the Uzbek government portrayed the victims as terrorists and criminals opposed to the constitutional order, who were not proper Uzbeks or real men.27 Similar framing strategies were at play for the 2015 events.

For Schmitt, the sovereign's will is not checked or regulated by anything beyond itself; it can never be challenged. Any challenge to the sovereign's will is tantamount to betrayal and places the challenger outside of the community as an enemy. An enemy is "existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible."28 Discourses about the threat of the Other are essential to defining the Self. In keeping with Schmitt's concept of the political, the government created a Friend/Enemy discourse and defined Nazaroda as an enemy of the nation, thus helping to reinforce their community's boundaries.

State media framed Nazarzoda as a "coward" and a "traitor," who betrayed "the sacred land of his ancestors" and "disrupt[ed] the peace and security of the Motherland."29 Speaking shortly after the events, president Rahmon stated "we will…prevent these rebels from reaching their evil goal. In fact, within

24 "Kabul ekstradiroval v Dushanbe storonnikov myatezhnogo generala Nazarzoda" [Kabul Extradited Supporters of the Rebellious General Nazarzoda to Dushanbe], TajInfo, 28 June 2018, https://news.tajinfo.org/2018/06/28/kabul-ekstradiroval-v-dushanbe-storo nnikov-myatezhnogo-generala-nazarzoda/.

25 Owen et al., *Interrogating Illiberal Peace*.

26 Edward Lemon, "Mediating the Conflict in the Rasht Valley: The Hegemonic Narrative and Anti-Hegemonic Challenges, Tajikistan," *Central Asian Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2014): 247–72; David Lewis, "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no.3 (2015): 421–38.

27 Nick Megoran, "Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov's Account of the Events of 13 May 2005," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no.1 (2008): 15–31.

28 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

29 Bahodur, Buzurgmehr, "Khoin" [Traitor], Jumhuriyat, 26 September 2015, https://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=21042.

a few days, these traitors will be annihilated."30 A report in state media outlet *Khovar* questioned Nazarzoda's sanity and framed his actions as in direct contravention of national values; a person who has the slightest knowledge of wisdom and humanity should be grateful to the government of Tajikistan, and serve honestly and faithfully."31

Nazarzoda was framed not only as an enemy of the nation, but also as a terrorist. According to the official narrative, the actions of Nazarzoda and his group provided further evidence of the IRPT's links to terrorism.32 In June 2016, the Supreme Court charged 16 senior members of the IRPT with orchestrating the alleged coup. The verdict claimed that Nazarzoda and the IRPT, "with malicious political intent of creating an Islamic state in Tajikistan, in contravention to Article 100 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, established a secret political activity for the IRPT, which was overthrow of the Constitutional system through armed uprising."33 The verdict continued to state that the IRPT was reacting violently to the Supreme Court's August 28 ruling that the party cease all activities within ten days; in response, IRPT leader Muhiddin Kabiri sent $1.2 million to Nazarzoda on September 2 to fund the coup. The ProsecUTOr General said that Kabiri started planning the "coup" in 2010, when he ordered Nazarzoda to form 20 "criminal groups" with ten to 30 members; by 2015 the number of conspirators had swelled to 300, according to the government.34 The government portrayed the above events as a continuation of the civil war in the 1990s.35 This portrayal was part of a broader attempt to re-write the history of the conflict and peacebuilding to portray the IRPT as villains and Emomali Rahmon as the sole bringer of peace. As Tim Epkenhans argues, "the civil war is a period, not of shared responsibility for conflict and peace, but where the co-signatories of the peace agreement are now presented as the

30 Khojazoda, Hamdam, "Vahdat – Mizboni Vahdat" [Unity- The Host of Unity], Jumhuriyat, 20 June 2017, https://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=29786.

31 "Izhoroti Prokuraturai generalī oid ba naqşahoi ittihodi çinojatii Abduhalim Nazar- zoda (video)" [Statement of the ProsecUTOr General's Office on the Plans of Abduhalim Nazarzoda's Criminal Organization (Video)], Khovar, 25 September 2015, http://khovar .tj/2015/09/iz-oroti-prokuraturai-general-oid-ba-na-sha-oi-itti-odi-inoyatii-abdu-alim -nazarzoda-video/.

32 "Durugh Megujand Bo Durugh Nafas Megirand" [They Breathe with Lies], Jumhuriyat, 9 December 2016, https://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=27187.

33 Article 100 of the Constitution reads "The republican form of government, the territorial integrity, the democratic, law-governed, secular, and social nature of the State are unchangeable."

34 "Dodsitonī: Hamlai "Hoçī Halim" 5 sol peş tarhrezī şuda bud" [Prosecution: The Hoji Halim attack was planned five years ago], Radio Ozodi, 26 September 2015, https://www .ozodi.org/a/tajik-official-statement-about-recent-military-conflict/27271861.html.

35 "Sukhanronii Vaziri korhoi dokhilī" [Speech by the Minister of Internal Affairs], Ministry of Internal Affairs, 5 October 2015, http://mvd.tj/old/index.php/tj/baromad-o/8864-tto9sh.

enemies of the nation."36 In an attempt to link the rebellion to previous political violence, ten supporters of Mirzo Ziyoyev, the former UTO command- er and Minister of Emergency Situations who was killed in 2009, were detained in November for being involved in the "coup" following the testimony of an- other detainee.37

To re-enforce the notion that Nazarzoda and the IRPT were not truly part of the Tajik nation, the hegemonic narrative framed them as "international terrorists" with linkages to foreign terrorist organizations and Iran. During search operations, the police claimed to have found 114 tapes with extremist materials produced by the Islamic State and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, among others. In a further attempt to link the group to international terrorism, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that two former prisoners from Guantanamo Bay, Mehrubon Odinaev and Shafi Solekhov, fought with Nazarzoda. Neither is on the list of detainees published by the *New York Times*.38 The government aimed to signal popular consensus of its version of events. A poll of 831 Dushanbe residents, conducted by the state-controlled Center for Strategic Research under the President, indicated that 80 percent of residents believed the official narrative that Nazarzoda was a terrorist.39

To further re-enforce the us/them discourse, the government stressed that foreign powers orchestrated the rebellion. Speaking shortly after the incidents, Rahmon stated:

> The latest events have demonstrated that there are still people wishing to destroy the foundation of the lasting peace of Tajiks (*sulhi poidori Tojik- onro*) and set fire to their home with the assistance, guidance, support and financing of their foreign masters (*khojahoi khoriji*).40

In August 2017, state television aired a Ministry of Internal Affairs documentary titled "Iran: Support for Civil War 91–97." Based on the testimony of three

36 Tim Epkenhans, "Oblivion, Ambivalence, and Historical Erasure: Remembering the Civil War in Tajikistan," in *Tajikistan on the Move*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (New York: Lexington, 2018): 198.

37 "Zaderzhany 10 storonnikov Mirzo Ziyoyeva" [10 Supporters of Mirzo Ziyoyev Detained], TajInfo, 9 November 2015, http://www.tajinfo.org/post/2015/11/09/635826845866536036.

38 "Citizens of Tajikistan," The Guantanamo Docket, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/guantanamo/country/tajikistan.

39 "mts: "80% pursidaşudaho gurūhi Nazarzodaro terroristī guftand"" [mts: 80% of respon- dents call Nazarzoda's group terrorists], Radio Ozodi, 3 October 2015, https://www.ozodi.org/a/servey-about-recent-events-in-tajikistan/27284700.html.

40 "Sukhanronī zimni vokhūrī bo afsaronu sarвozoni çuz'u tomhoi Quvvahoi Musallah va maqomoti hifzi huquq" [Speech at a meeting with officers and soldiers of the Armed Forces and law enforcement agencies], President.tj, 25 September 2015, http://president.tj/node/9979.

of Nazarzoda's alleged accomplices, the documentary argued that Nazarzoda, with financial assistance and training from Iran, conducted a series of political assassinations. Targets included renowned scholar Muhammad Osimi (killed in 1996), journalist Otakhon Latifi (killed in 1998), former parliament speaker Safarali Kenjaev (killed in 1999), and an attack on Russian troops stationed in the country which killed 20.41 Iran had a relatively close relationship with Tajikistan, especially under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who stressed the countries shared Persian heritage and launched a number of investment projects.42 By 2015 this relationship had deteriorated, with Iran accusing the Tajik government of stealing over one billion dollars and the Tajik government accusing Iran of supporting the IRPT.43 Given the deterioration of bilateral relations, Iran were convenient external foes to link to the September events.

While framing Nazarzoda's activities as driven by foreign powers, the government leveraged partnerships with Russia and China to demonstrate an international consensus about its framing. While the US criticized the government's crackdown on the political opposition, Vladimir Putin offered his support to Rahmon during a September 4 phone call, the first foreign leader to do so.44 The Shanghai Cooperation Organization stated its support for the operation and efforts to "maintain peace and stability in the country." Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei stated that China was "paying close attention" and was "taking steps to ensure national stability and security."45

4 Challenging the Official Narrative

The Tajik government attempted to monopolize the production of information about the events. Cellphone signal in the Romit gorge was shut off, and the government blocked numerous social media platforms across the country. This

41 "V Irane posmotreli fil'm o podderzhke terroristov vo vremya voyny v Tadzhikistane i potrebovali ob"yasneniy" [Iran Demands Clarification about a Film Accusing it of Supporting Terrorism in the Tajik Civil War], Current Time, 10 August 2017, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/28667647.html.

42 See Lukas Anderson, "Iran's New Cultural Nationalism: Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2019): 21–46.

43 Edward Lemon and Omid Rahimi, "A Thaw Between Tajikistan and Iran, But Challenges Remain," Eurasia Daily Monitor, 16, no.98 (2019), https://jamestown.org/program/ a-thaw-between-tajikistan-and-iran-but-challenges-remain/.

44 "Putin nazval sobytiya v Tadzhikistane popytkoy destabilizirovat' situatsiyu v strane" [Pu- tin called the events in Tajikistan an attempt to destabilize the situation in the country], Govorit Moskva, 5 September 2015, https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/51385/.

45 "Himoyati chin az amalijot alaihi general Nazarzoda" [China's Support for the Operation against General Nazarzoda], Radio Ozodi, 10 September 2015, https://www.ozodi.org/a/china-supports-tajik-security-measures-/27236556.html.

created, according to journalist Rajabi Mirzo, an information "vacuum," which led to the proliferation of conspiracy theories.46 In his work on conspiracy theories in Tajikistan, John Heathershaw argues that "the conspiracy theory is identified by its attempt to provide a complete explanation of a significant military, political or economic event as being secretly planned and directed by a single agent or group of conspirators."47 These hidden figures are often framed as being internal, the so-called "deep state," or external, the "foreign hand." A prominent theory on the social media argued that the attack on the Vahdat police department was planned by the security services as a way to legitimize the arrest of all former UTO field commanders. In a statement claiming to come from Nazarzoda himself, he claimed he was being targeted be- cause he did not agree with the policy to ban the IRPT. According to the statement, the government planned to use the incidents as an excuse to re- move remaining commanders of the UTO within the government:

> After these attacks, the authorities intended to throw the bodies of already killed commanders into these places and announce to the world that they were killed during the hostilities. They managed to imitate this only in the Vahdat police department, which was attacked by the Tajik special services themselves.48

According to a statement released by Nazarzoda supporters on September 6, the regime plotted to remove him for refusing to agree with the recent banning of the IRPT. When he heard that he the government was going to target him, Nazarzoda assembled supporters and decided to fight his way out.

The government's narrative did have inconsistencies. If Nazarzoda was planning a coup for several days, why did he not amass a larger group of fighters and weapons to allow him to have a chance at seizing power? As an experienced commander, he must have realized his attempt was futile. Journalist Peter Leonard visited the scene of "heavy fighting" at Vahdat police station on September 5 and found little evidence that a gun battle had taken place.49 The

46 "Zhurnalistoni Tojik dar "inzivoi ittilootī" qaror megirand" [Tajik Journalists are Subject to "Information Isolation"], Radio Ozodi, 21 September 2015, https://www.ozodi.org/a/tajik-journalists-nformation-vakuum-/27260621.html.

47 John Heathershaw, "Of National Fathers and Russian Elder Brothers: Conspiracy Theories and Political Ideas in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *The Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 611.

48 "Eks-zamministra Tadzhikistana oproverg prichastnost' k dvum napadeniyam" [Former Deputy Minister of Tajikistan Denied Involvement in Two Attacks], ria Novosti, 7 September 2015, https://ria.ru/20150907/1234125560.html.

49 Peter Leonard, "Vakhdat police station. Does it look like there was a big battle here?" Twitter, 5 September 2015, https://twitter.com/Peter Leonard/status/640033280713068544.

police station in Vahdat, which had been allegedly attacked, had no broken windows or bullet marks. The site of the clash in Dushanbe was similar, with residents reporting hearing short-lived gun fire in both locations. This would not be the first time the Tajik government misrepresented the circumstances of an armed incident. In January 2011, the regime claimed to have killed militant leader Ali Bedaki in a gun battle; a video later emerged that showed Bedaki being interrogated at gunpoint.

Ferghana News ran an article that offered analysis by several leading local experts.50 All agreed that several questions surrounded the hegemonic narrative. For Tajik academic Parviz Mullojonov, "these events were clearly not an attempt at a coup, it was a provocation. Most likely, the general was implicated in the actions that were provoked from the outside." Journalist Timur Varki had a similar opinion, stating that "the way the situation with the 'rebellion' of General Nazarzoda was arranged, how quickly the Ministry of Internal Affairs identified the perpetrators and linked them to the IRPT, suggests an analogy with the burning of the Reichstag." The experts argued that rather than a coup, the rebellion was better viewed as provoked from within the state, wherefore Nazarzoda reacted violently to an attempt to remove him from his position.

5 Who was Abduhalim Nazarzoda?

An examination of Nazarzoda's career also challenges the official narrative. Nazarzoda was born in 1964, in Rudaki district of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. After graduating from high school and working for a while in the textile industry of Dushanbe, he was conscripted into the Soviet Army in 1983. Having earned some extra money working in procurement in the army, when he left and developed business activities in 1985, working in two state construction companies. He gradually became more involved in politics, especially after the August Coup in Moscow in 1991. After Tajikistan became independent, he actively participated in the nationalist and anti-communist rallies on the Shahidon square of Dushanbe, which formed the prelude to civil war in the spring of 1992. He supplied food and water to opposition protesters sitting outside of the presidential office in Shahidon square.51 After going on the Hajj pilgrimage in

50 "Komu na ruku vooruzhennyy myatezh v Tadzhikistane? Analiz, mneniya, kommentarii" [Who Benefits from Armed Rebellion in Tajikistan? Analysis, Opinions, Comments], Fergana News, 7 September 2015, https://www.ferganews.com/articles/8681.

51 An associate of Nazarzoda in discussion with the author, January 2019.

1992, he was known as "Hoji Halim." At the same time, he further developed his business activities, establishing a company called Nazar, which sold timber.

Nazarzoda's role in the civil war remains disputed. Tajik media, as well as state officials, introduced him as a commander of UTO forces under the leadership of IRPT. During the early months of the civil war in 1992, Nazarzoda commanded an armed opposition group in the Karotegin district of Dushanbe, but he had no known affiliation. There were countless local commanders like him in 1992; the IRPT had very few commanders under its direct control.52 Nazarzoda's precise whereabouts during the civil war is subject to debate. Abdusatar Babaev, an associate of Nazarzoda and a former member of the IRPT Supreme Council, claimed that Nazarzoda left the country and moved to Kazakhstan in 1992.53 However, some believe that during the civil war Nazarzoda played a supporting role for the UTO and refugees based in Afghanistan.54

With the signing of the Tajik Peace Accord in June 1997 between the government and the opposition, refugees and opposition forces returned to the country. According to the peace agreement, 30 per cent of government positions were to be given to the opposition. Some believe that Nazarzoda joined the army in 1997 under the auspices of this agreement.55 The state media claimed that President Rahmon "forgave his sins" and allowed Nazarzoda to join the army.56 Nevertheless, Ibrahim Othmanov, a former member of the Tajik National Reconciliation Commission which oversaw the implementation of the peace agreement, has stated that Nazarzoda joined the army independently and not through the UTO quota.57 Nazarzoda's rise through the ranks of the Tajik military to position of deputy defense minister may have been helped by the fact that he joined the army at his own initiative rather than being incorporated as part of the UTO quota. Only one former UTO commander, Ghairat

52 Christian Bleuer, "Attack on the Opposition in Tajikistan: Afghan Concerns and Comparisons," Afghan Analysts Network, 28 October 2015, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/ attack-on-the-opposition-in-tajikistan-afghan-concerns-and-comparisons.

53 Abdusatar Babaev (former member of IRPT Supreme Council) in discussion with the author, November 2018.

54 A former UTO member in discussion with the author, January 2019.

55 "Romit residents detain 18 supporters of Nazarzoda and hand over them to authorities," Asia Plus, 11 September 2015, https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20150911/ romit-residents-detain-18-supporters-nazarzoda-and-hand-over-them-authorities.

56 "Içtimoijot" [Ungrateful], Jumhuriyat, 30 September 2015, https://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=21096.

57 "Ibrohim Usmonov: "Nazarzoda bar asosi sahmijabandī voridi sokhtorhoi qudratī naşudaast" [Ibrohim Usmonov: "Nazarzoda did not Join Law Enforcement Agencies in the Quota," Kimiyoi Saodat, 11 September 2015, https://bit.ly/3bS4keE.

Ahmadov, rose to the rank of Deputy Defense Minister, serving from 2007 until Nazarzoda replaced him in 2014.

In 1997, Nazarzoda was appointed commander of military base 31001, a bat- talion of 400 troops stationed in Dushanbe. In the first years after the end of the Soviet Union, there were ongoing border disputes between Tajikistan and its Uzbek and Kyrgyz neighbors. Neighboring forces routinely passed through unmarked borders and were perceived by Tajik government as violating the territorial integrity of Tajikistan. The 25th Battalion, commanded by Nazarzoda for six years, was the unit that responded to these incursions or any unrest.58 The unit was assembled from former opposition forces in the UTO's 25thbattalion.

The 25th Battalion was dissolved in 2003 as part of the purge process orchestrated by Rahmon, through which all opposition forces were eventually removed from the government. Nazarzoda survived, leaving the unit and moving to the Ministry of Defense where he was appointed Chief of the Operations Department of the Land Forces Department until 2005 and then served as First Deputy Commander of the Land Forces until his promotion to deputy defense minister in 2014. He received a diploma from Russia's Combined Arms Academy in 2007, followed by his graduation from Tajik National University at in 2010. While some of his men felt betrayal due to Nazarzoda's promotion, the other former 25th Battalion remained in contact with their former commander as members of his patronage network. These patrons supported him, or were accused of being his supporters, during the September 2015 incidents.

According to IRPT leader Muhiddin Kabiri, "Rahmon's government regard- ed [Nazarzoda] as an honest officer, loyal to both nation and state. That is why he was gradually promoted to the rank of Major-General and the position of deputy defense minister. In Badakhshon, Isfara and any other crises, he was given the responsibility to carry out the government's mission because they trusted his capabilities, honor and honesty."59 Nazarzoda lacked a public profile prior to the 2015 events. He was aware of political constraints facing military commanders in Tajikistan, and he adhered to them carefully. But he was also religious and criticized the government's secular policies. According to Babaev, Nazarzoda maintained close contact with the Tajik people, becoming aware of their problems. He was obviously dissatisfied with the state-based anti-Islamic policies and restrictions imposed on people.60

58 An associate of Nazarzoda in discussion with the author, January 2019.

59 Muhiddin Kabiri (leader of the IRPT) in discussion with the author, November 2018.

60 Abdusatar Babaev (a former member of the IRPT Supreme Council) in discussion with the author, November 2018.

6 Disagreements with the IRPT

The important issue of the disagreements between Nazarzoda and the IRPT has not been fully addressed in the analysis of the September events. Nazarzoda has often been considered as being aligned with the IRPT due to siding with the opposition during pre-civil war events. The Tajik authorities insisted that Nazarzoda was a member of the IRPT, a claim which the party itself denies.

While Nazarzoda did hold common views with the IRPT on the political situation in Tajikistan and treatment of religion, their views diverged in two important ways. First, they differed in their views of security. When the murder of the local security chief led to a security crackdown in Khorog in the summer of 2012 in which over 100 civilians died, Nazarzoda supported the campaign. According to Kabiri, "Nazarzoda completely supported the government's policies in Badakhshan and actively did his job. However, the IRPT was absolutely in opposition [to the government's actions]. I expressed my disagreement about what the government was doing in Badakhshan thorough the media and privately to Nazarzoda on a frequent basis."61 During the operation, the leader of IRPT branch in Badakhshan, Sabzali Muhammadrezaev, died under mysterious circumstances.

Second, the restrictions imposed on Nazarzoda as a senior military commander in an authoritarian state led him to experience a model dilemma. He was aware of the significant costs of any disobedience against President Rahmon's orders and views. The aftermath of the parliamentary elections of 2010 is a good example. According to Kabiri:

> Two days after the election, hundreds of people gathered in the [IRPT] party headquarters and the majority demanded for a protest rally against [government] cheating in the election. At that time, Hoji Halim [Nazarzoda] delivered a message of warning from the security officials that they would undoubtedly fire on any demonstration. I still believe that he did his job as a military officer honestly; he didn't want the streets to be covered in blood. He was not lying. We received reports that the party headquarters was surrounded by armed forces waiting in buses. Whether they would really open the fire to civilians or not, I cannot surely answer. But I remember he told me: in 2005 a thousand people were killed in Uzbekistan [in Andijon], here we will kill five thousand.62

61 Muhiddin Kabiri (leader of the IRPT) in discussion with the author, November 2018.
62 Ibid.

Contrary to the hegemonic state narrative, then, while Nazarzoda maintained connections to the IRPT, he was not formally a member of the party and he served loyally in a number of military operations that helped the government of Emomali Rahmon consolidate its control over the country.

7 Towards a Better Understanding of the Events

Schmitt argued that any pluralist political order is unstable and produces conflict. Dialogue cannot overcome conflict; instead, stability derives from a sovereign who can act decisively to defend the nation. The sovereign therefore needs to remove decision-making from other actors. As it consolidated its sovereignty, the regime of Emomali Rahmon cracked down on two rival sources of decision-making: first, the conflict was a product of Tajikistan's post-civil warlord politics and the assertion of hegemonic control across the country by the ruling regime; second, the 2015 conflict was part of the gradual marginalization of the ruling regime's civil war opponents, the IRPT.

8 War on the Warlords

Like other political violence in the country since the end of the civil war, the 2015 events are better understood through the local process of post-war state formation, rather than through the lens of international terrorism and an attempted coup. The conflict was a product of the nature of statebuilding in Tajikistan, particularly during and immediately after the civil war. Groundbreaking research by Paul Staniland, Dan Slater, and Jesse Driscoll has demonstrated the utility of bottom-up approaches focusing on how political stability can emerge from inter-factional pacts and negotiated settlements.63 Departing from a Hobbesian conception of anarchy, Slater argues that elites will sur- render some of their autonomy to the state during periods of conflict when they fear loss of their livelihoods and property. Preferential access to political privileges and rents help hold these elite coalitions together. Eventually, a protection pact may evolve into a state with strong coercive power, known as "authoritarian leviathan," as in the case in Tajikistan.

63 Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

When Rahmon came to power in 1992, he relied heavily on the support of warlords, most notably his patron and convicted criminal, Sangak Safarov. In other words, Rahmon was not a sovereign authority. When he formed his government in 1992 the warlords were well-represented. Safarov led the newly named People's Army. Another commander and ex-criminal, Yaqub Salimov, was appointed Minister of Interior. Suhrob Qosymov, a one-time schoolteacher and a karate instructor, commanded the Special Forces of Dushanbe Police from his base in Varzob from 1993. Sulton Quvvatov headed the Ministry of the Interior's Unit of Combatting Economic Crimes and headed the Tax Committee from 1995. Ghaffor Mirzoyev became head of the Presidential Guard in 1995. As Kirill Nourzhanov argues, "these warlords have been instrumental in restoring the collapsed state in Tajikistan; on many occasions they worked on its behalf propping up centralized government at the national level."64 Another round of warlord integration came in 1997 with the signing of the Peace Accord, which offered 30 percent of government positions to the opposition. These former commanders of the opposition were given positions that allowed them to generate rents from drug trafficking, patronage, and other activities.65 As Jesse Driscoll states:

> Many warlords became violence subcontractors for the regime. Some did not. Complicated bargaining followed. Back-room deals were struck. A great deal of property changed hands. Peace emerged as local criminals developed techniques to hold civilians hostage and re-write local history to their advantage. In other words, the warlords became the state.66

As the government of Emomali Rahmon established its position, it purged these commanders from their positions, eventually establishing a Schmittian monopoly on decision-making.

Like Nazarzoda, the government accused other former commanders of rebelling against it. Between 1996 and 1998, Colonel Mahmud Khudoberdiev led three separate rebellions against the central authorities. Yaqub Salimov, former Minister of Internal Affairs and pro-government commander during the civil war, was charged with involvement in two "coup attempts" in 1997 and 1998. General Ghaffor Mirzoyev, the former head of the presidential guard and Drug

64 Kiril Nourzhanov, "Saviours of the Nation or Robber Barons? Warlord Politics in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no.1 (2005): 111.

65 See, Lawrence Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics.*

66 Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics*, 30.

Control Agency, was sentenced for a January 2004 coup plot.67 Former opposition commander Mahmadruzi Iskandarov published an appeal to parliament urging it to remove Rahmon from power in April 2004. The statement ended with the following warning: "We are no longer afraid. If you don't stop, we know where you live. You won't be able to divide us into Kulobis, Gharmis, Leninobodis and Hissoris anymore."68 Iskandarov was kidnapped in Moscow the following year. Mirzo Ziyoyev, former commander with the UTO and Minister of Emergency Situations until 2006, was accused by the government of kidnapping three soldiers in May 2009. On July 11, Ziyoyev was arrested and then killed in mysterious circumstances. Following the July 22, 2012 murder of Major-General Abdullo Nazarov, head of the regional branch of the State Committee on National Security, government troops intervened in the capital of the Pamirs Khorog. The troops targeted four former opposition commanders, Tolib Ayombekov, Imomnazar Imomnazarov, Muhamadboqir Muhamadboqirov and Yodgor Shomusallomov, who they accused of murdering Nazarov and smuggling tobacco, precious stones and drugs across the nearby border with Afghanistan. During this period, as Parviz Mullojonov and John Heathershaw argue, "conflict management passed from a *non-hegemonic* to a *hegemonic* approach in the decade between 2000 and 2010."69 Since then, we have seen a combination of elite capture and limited violence, such as in 2015.

Like the other commanders, Nazarzoda was purged as part of the government's assertion of sovereignty. Evidence points to the 2015 events being Nazarzoda's pre-emptive attempt to go out fighting, rather than a coup. Immediately before the 2015 events, the government had just banned IRPT, and there was evidence of a broader crackdown on former opposition commanders. When the special forces of State Committee for National Security (SCNS) attacked another former UTO commander Zioriddin and killed him, the action sent a message to Nazarzoda.70 He knew there was no choice; to avoid imprisonment or murder, the only option was to resist. In response, Nazarzoda gathered his allies and escaped to Romit. According to Parviz Mullojonov and JohnHeathershaw:

> The aim of insurgency and rebellion is not necessarily to overthrow or to capture the state, but to extract a greater proportion of state-derived rents, whether in the form of public offices, international aid, a share of

67 "Tajik President's Former Guard Gets Life for Coup Plot," Radio Free Europe, 12 August 2006, https://www.rferl.org/a/1070530.html.

68 Kiril Nourzhanov, "Saviours of the Nation," 126.

69 Heathershaw and Mullojonov, "Authoritarian Conflict Management," 51.

70 An associate of Nazarzoda in discussion with the author, January 2019.

the illicit market (in drugs, for example), or state- funded infrastructure projects.71

The 2015 events fit within this framework, although in this case Nazarzoda reacted violently to the move to marginalize him and remove him from his lucrative position within the state.

9 Protocol No 32–20: The Crackdown on the IRPT

For Schmitt, the Friend/Enemy distinction becomes clearest in the key moments of that define the political, such as when the sovereign declares a state of exception and "the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recogni[z]ed as the enemy" by the decision of the sovereign.72 The government's campaign to purge the regime of potentially disloyal commanders coincided with a broader crack- down on opposition parties. Until 2015, the IRPT held two seats, a symbol of the 1997 peace accord which allowed IRPT to be re-established as an opposition party. At its height, the IRPT was the country's second largest party by membership, claiming over 44,000 members, and consistently claimed to have performed better in elections than the official results, despite coming under pressure from the ruling regime.73

According to many within Tajikistan's opposition, the real results of the 2010 parliamentary elections threatened Rahmon's power for the first time. The IRPT claimed to have won more than half of the seats in the lower house of parliament, the *Majlis Namoyandagon*. The official results gave the IRPT just eight percent of the vote and two seats in parliament. The party leadership re- acted to the results by accusing the electoral committee of rigging the election, a conclusion that was shared with observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who noted "notable shortcomings" in the conduct of the vote.74 The party intended to hold a demonstration but reversed this decision due to the government's threats to use violence to suppress pro- testers, as mentioned above.

Fear of the opposition generated by the results of the elections led Rahmon to take serious measures. In March 2012, the Russian-based website *Zvezda.ru*

71 ~~Heather~~shaw and Mullojonov, "Authoritarian Conflict Management in Tajikistan," 39.
72 Carl Schmitt. *The Concept of the Political*, 20.
73 Muhiddin Kabiri (leader of the IRPT) in discussion with the author, November 2018.
74 "hnit: Intikhobot ghajrişaffof va ghajridemokratī bud" [IRPT: The Election was Non-transparent and Undemocratic], Radio Ozodi, 1 March 2010, https://www.ozodi.org/a/1970909.html.

published two classified documents about Tajikistan. Immediately after, the Communication's Service ordered internet providers to block the website. By then, the documents called Protocol No. 32–20 had already spread all over the country. The classified Protocol, signed by President Rahmon, outlined plans to "keep under constant control the activities of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan," including their controlling their finances and ordering the security services to put pressure on members to leave the party, with the eventual goal of the party's dismantlement.75 The Protocol outlined plans for a smear campaign, ordering government officials to "take the necessary measures to publish in the media the facts of the illegal activities of the leaders of the [IRPT]." It also outlined plans to "recognize those who participated in the strikes in 1992 and take the necessary measures at their place of residence," a violation of the Peace Accord that ended the civil war.76

Although the content of the protocol was never officially recognized, subsequent developments indicate that its plan was followed by the security services. First, the government took steps to de-legitimize the IRPT and link it to violence. The official state discourse conflates Islamization with radicalization; it contends that Islamic parties—most notably the IRPT—directly contribute to Islamic State recruitment by making people challenge the natural, secular order.77 "As the events in Syria and Iraq have shown, the first to join the ranks of the Islamic State were people with connections to Islamic movements," one journalist argued.78 Half of the Tajiks who have joined the Islamic State were members of the IRPT, another claims.79 By blurring the boundary between moderate parties like the IRPT and terrorist movements like the Islamic State, the regime de-legitimized all forms of faith-based opposition to its rule. As political scientist, Abdulqodir Kalomov argued, "people saw a vote for the IRPT as contributing to the influence of the party in society, thus indicating a possible tendency for young people to join the ranks of more terrorist movements."80

75 "Protokoli № 32–20" [Protocol 32–20], TajInfo, 19 January 2016, https://www.tajinfo.org/peopleistaravshani/post/2016/01/19/635888155757474442.

76 "Ot mirnogo soglasheniya do arestov" [From a Peace Agreement to Arrests], Asia Plus, 5 September 2015, https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20151005/ot-mirnogo-soglasheniya-do-arestov.

77 "hnit az Haft Puşti Dunjavijat Bezor ast" [IRPT Has No Desire for Secularism], Jumhuriyat, 10 July 2015, http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=19887.

78 "hnit. Oyo Metavon Onro Cun «Hizbi Çabrdida» Paziruft?" [IRPT: Are they the "Party of the Victims"?], Jumhuriyat, 3 July 2015, http://www.jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=19813.

79 "hnit: Az Bayonija To Bayonija" [IRPT from Statement to Statement], Jumhuriyat, 6 August 2014, http://www.jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=15374.

80 "Jaro Mardum ba hnit Ovoz Nadod?" [Why did People not Vote for the IRPT?], Jumhuriyat, 17 March 2015, http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=18429.

Between 2010 and 2015, the government claimed 45 members of the IRPT had been convicted of criminal offenses, 17 of them for crimes of an extremist and terrorist nature.81 These included: Husniddin Davlatov, the brother of Ali Bedaki, who was accused of joining Bedaki's armed group in 2010; Sherik Karamkhudoyev, the head of the IRPT's branch in Khorog, who was accused of participating in the armed events in Khorog in 2012; and five alleged members of the IRPT in Nurek, who were accused of flying an Islamic State flag in August 2015.82

The government narrative also claimed that the party was against the true, "good," peaceful Islam promoted by the state. On the eve of the March 2015 parliamentary elections, imams read a prepared text during their Friday sermon. It stated that:

> Today, there are some people who blacken the name of the [president's ruling PDP] party, who blacken the name of Islam. These statements are nothing more than exaggeration. These words are spoken by those who have usurped Islam for their own selfish purposes and scare people with religion. […] In neighboring countries, parties and groups who act in the name of Islam exist, but today on their territory blood has been spilt. These parties are foreign to us, they blow up mosques, destroy people's tranquility and make children orphans.83

Once combined with politics, religion becomes a tool used for the pursuit of power. For one analyst, "the word Islam in the name [of the Islamic State] is used solely to attract people."84 Radical Islamists are framed as puppets in the hands of elusive "great powers." Referring to the Arab Spring, journalist Samariddin Kiyom asks "but is democracy the ultimate goal? Of course not. The goal is to render them totally dependent on outside powers."85

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81 "hnit taşkiloti ifrotgaroi terroristī e'lon va fa'olijati man' karda şud" [The IRPT was Declared an Extremist Terrorist Organization and Banned], Ministry of Internal Affairs, 3 October 2015, http://mvd.tj/old/index.php/tj/asosi/8849-nit-tashkiloti-ifrotgaroyu-terrorist-e-lon-va-fa-oliyatash-man-karda-shud.

82 "Nigohe ba cehrai taşkiloti ekstremistiyu terroristam hizbi nahzati islom" [A Look at the Face of the Extremist and Terrorist Organization of the Islamic Revival Party], Prosecutor General, 1 October 2015, http://www.prokuratura.tj/point65/66-to-ik/news/873-alasai- ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-215.html.

83 Lemon, Edward, "Tajikistan's Clergy Urges Support for President's Party in Weekend Vote," EurasiaNet, 27 February 2015, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72311.

84 "hnit. Oyo Metavon Onro Cun «Hizbi Çabrdida» Paziruft?" [IRPT: Are they the "Party of the Victims"?], Jumhuriyat, 3 July 2015, http://www.jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=19813.

85 "Naqşahoi Pinhonii hnit" [The IRPT's Secret Plans], Jumhuriyat, 19 August 2014, http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=15538.

For Schmitt, a sovereign order is not only defined by a monopoly on decision-making but also on the acceptance of its decisions by the community. The government combined their rhetorical campaign of radicalization with efforts to defame and discredit its members. Throughout 2014 and 2015, state media accused members of sexual impropriety.86 In February 2015, hackers posted a conversation between party leader Kabiri and an unmarried woman.87 These efforts were part of a broader campaign of "factory of answers" (*fabrika javob*). This term refers to the efforts of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security to promote the government narrative and to portray oppositional thinking as dangerous and treacherous.88 The state media gave the impression of a "national consensus" to close the IRPT, drawing statements from farmers, sport champions, professors, clerics and former UTO members, all calling on Rahmon to close the IRPT. This strategy was part Rahmon's move to present the banning of the party as a response to the peoples' will.89 Two groups of testimonies were particularly important: former members of the IRPT and former UTO commanders. For instance, Abdurahim Karim, the IRPT commander who attacked a border post in 1993, leaving 25 Russian border guards dead, began a campaign against the party after he gave up his membership in 2011. Throughout the summer of 2015, members of the party appeared on state television to denounce the party and publicly resign their member- ship. One of the victims was Ilhomjon Yaqubov, leader of the Central Asian Immigrants Association in Europe, who claims he was tortured and forced to publicly denounce the party.90

At the same time, Rahmon used this opportunity to measure the obedience and loyalty of former UTO commanders; obeying him by taking such a stance against their former allies could prove their ultimate loyalty to the state.91 However, former UTO commanders such as Abduhalim Nazarzoda and Junaid Umarov, a former commander who died with Nazarzoda, never accepted these statements, while others did with obvious discontent. Rahmon changed his

86 "Who Is Out To Get Tajikistan's Islamic Party?" Radio Free Europe, 17 April 2014, https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-islamic-party-pressured/25352344.html.

87 "Tadzhikistan: Gryaznyye metody po diskreditatsii oppozitsii pered parlamentskimi vyborami" [Tajikistan: Dirty Methods to Discredit the Opposition before the Parliamentary Elections], Ozodagon, 13 February 2015, http://catoday.org/centrasia/18386-tadzhikistan-gryaznye-metody-po-diskreditacii-oppozicii-pered-parlamentskimi-vyborami.html.

88 Sophie Roche, ""The Fabric of Answer: Constructing a National Facade." *Central Asian Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2018): 93–110.

89 Muhiddin Kabiri (leader of IRPT) in discussion with the author, November 2018.

90 Ilhomjon Yaqubov (former IRPT member and leader of "Central Asian Immigrants Association in Europe") in discussion with the author, November 2018.

91 Muhiddin Kabiri (leader of IRPT) in discussion with the author, November 2018.

plan to purge these dissenting elements. He concluded that the "disobedient" commanders should be imprisoned or physically removed. Meanwhile, Nazarzoda did not wish to be arrested like Yaqub Salimov, Gafur Mirzoev or Muhammadruzi Iskandarov, but decided to resist instead.92

The campaign against the IRPT was not restricted to discourse. Its offices were raided numerous times. Some members were attacked and killed. On June 16, 2015, the state-controlled newspaper *Jumhiriyat* accused Kabiri of illegally buying property in 1999; Kabiri, who was out of the country at the time, was effectively exiled.93 On August 14, 2015, city authorities closed the party's publishing house, *Muattar*, for violating sanitary and medical regulations.94 Two weeks later, the ProsecUTOr General ordered that the IRPT's central office be closed due to an "unresolved dispute about the legality of the building's acquisition."95

On August 28, a week before the alleged coup, the Tajik Ministry of Justice delivered a letter to IRPT. The letter, signed by Minister of Justice Rustam Shohmurad, stated that most of the party's office in the country's 58 districts were inactive, and therefore the party could not be classified as a "public party" under the Law on Political Parties (2010).96 At the end of the letter obtained from IRPT archive,97 the ministry made three requests. First, the party should stop its "illegal activity." Second, it gave a ten-day deadline for the party to respond. Finally, if no response was received, the party would be forcibly closed.98 By February 2016, a total of 199 cases were sent to court, 172 of which were related to Nazarzoda and 27 to the IRPT; a further 40 citizens had fled the country and were still wanted.99

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92 Ibid.

93 "Asrori Puşti Pardai Tiçorati Kabiri" [The Secrets Behind Kabiri's Business], Jumhuriyat, 16 June 2015, http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=19633.

94 "The Authorities Have Closed the Publishing House of the IRPT for "Failure to Provide Medical Treatment," Asia Plus, 14 August 2015, https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20150814/authorities-have-closed-publishing-house-IRPT-failure-provide-medi cal-treatme.

95 "Ofis tsentral'nogo shtaba pivt opechatan" [The IRPT Headquarters is Sealed], Radio Ozodi, 25 August 2015, https://rus.ozodi.org/a/27207077.html.

96 "Vazorati adliya az hnit qat'i fa'olijatro talab namud" [The Ministry of Justice Demanded that the IRPT Cease Its Operations], Asia Plus, 28 August 2015, https://asiaplustj.info/tj/news/tajikistan/politics/20150828/vazorati-adliya-az-nit-ati-faoliyatro-talab-namud.

97 The state news agency *Khovar* first published the letter, the link was removed afterward.

98 The text of the letter was obtained from the IRPT archive.

99 "Tahqiqi "dasti khorijī" dar oşūbi Hojī Halim," Radio Ozodi, 8 February 2016, https://www.ozodi.org/a/27537995.html.

10 Conclusion: Becoming Leader of the Nation

Serious inconsistencies exist in the official narrative about what happened in September 2015. On balance, the incidents do not appear to have been a coup. As an experienced commander, he would surely have realized that his handful of men could not topple the government. Instead, he went on the defensive, retreating to the Romit gorge, where he could try to fend off attacks. Finally, the government has never proven the connection between the closure of IRPT and Nazarzoda's coup.

Whether the incidents of September 2015 happened or not, the government would have eventually classified the IRPT as a terrorist group. The incidents only affected the timing of the move to label the group a terrorist organization.100 But the events helped legitimize the labelling. Within the space of two years, the government had formally dismantled the last symbolic remnants of post-civil war reconciliatory politics and had formally established a new system of authoritarian rule.

Three months after the declaration of the IRPT as a terrorist organization, the president signed a law making Emomali Rahmon "Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation," granting him and his family lifelong immunity from prosecution. In May 2016, a referendum was held on constitutional amendments that re-enforced the new law. Article 65, which placed limits on presidential terms, was removed. A ban was placed on religious parties, preventing the IRPT from re-forming. Lastly, the age limit to run for president was lowered to 30 years, allowing the president's son and assumed successor to potentially run in the presidential election scheduled for Fall 2020.

Rahmon had realized Schmitt's concept of the sovereign dictatorship. As Schmitt argued in *The Dictator*, "dictatorship does not *suspend* an existing constitution through a law based on the constitution[—]a constitutional law; rather it seeks to create conditions in which a constitution[—]a constitution that it regards as the true one[—]is made possible."101 By amending the constitution itself to enshrine the ban on the IRPT and legalize indefinite rule, Rahmon normalized the exception, and restored a normal situation in the country. As Schmitt argued, "for a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitively decides whether this normal situation actually exists."102 Rahmon realized his goal to create a de-facto one-party

100 Bobojon Qayumzoda (IRPT spokesman) in discussion with the author, January 2019.
101 Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013): 119.
102 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13.

state dominated by the ruling People's Democratic Party. At the same time, he managed to purge law enforcement of any possible rebellious elements, paving the way for an eventual transfer of power, most likely to his 32-year-old son Rustam, who became speaker of the upper house of parliament and second-in-line to the presidency in April 2020.103

103 Edward Lemon, "Thinking Toward Transition in Tajikistan," Wilson Center, 1 November 2018, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/thinking-toward-transition-tajikistan.