

Tajikistan

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The cold winter of 2008

I was just 14 when the Soviet Union collapsed and the civil war started in Tajikistan. In the beginning we didn't know that the war would cost over 150,000 lives and that it would set the country back dozens of years in its development. I remember those years well, and how hard they were both for our country and for my family.

At the end of 1991 independent Tajikistan's first general presidential election was won by Rakhmon Nabiev, the former Communist Party boss and a member of the "Leninabad" (northern) clan. His victory meant that the situation which had existed under Soviet power would remain unchanged.

For several months after the election, a delicate balance of power reigned in the country. Rakhmon Nabiev strove to observe the democratic principles that were so fashionable at the time and, at the same time, to run a socialist economy simply by inertia. The collapse of the Soviet Union made this virtually impossible. Very soon, mass demonstrations against the communists started in the capital's Shakhidon Square. The demonstrators were mainly refugees from the Karategin Valley (Garm) and from the Badakhshan Autonomous Province (Pamir). Their opponents, known officially as the Public Committee for the Protection of the Social Order, had organised an alternative, pro-government demonstration in Ozodi Square (the former Lenin Square), where refugees from Kulyab congregated.

The people called supporters of the opposition "Vovchiks" and supporters of the pro-government national front "Yurchiks". Everyone became involved – adults, young people and even children. In our apartment block the tenants were divided into Vovchik and Yurchik supporters. Neighbours stopped speaking to one another and families were on friendly terms only with those who shared their viewpoint. I remember my younger sister playing in the courtyard with her friends (she was six at the time) and witnessing a quarrel

between much older boys. The quarrel had an ethnic background, and was between Vovchik and Yurchik supporters, and she had no choice but to side with one or the other, as did the other children. She didn't know exactly which it was that our family supported, so she rushed home and asked her mother in an anxious little voice whether we were for the Vovchiks or for the Yurchiks, leaving my mother no option but to confess that we didn't support either side.

I remember my mother's sleepless nights as she waited anxiously for my father to come home. He is a surgeon, and in those difficult times he often had to stay at work until late at night, treating the wounded from both camps. Sometimes he would be collected by armed men in fatigues who would drive him to the hospital for emergency surgery, and all we could do was pray for him to come back alive, since his life depended on the outcome of the operation.

In those difficult times my parents absolutely forbade me to go out for walks because the militants were everywhere. They raped girls, could beat up a passer-by because they didn't like the look of him, squatted in empty apartments and made market traders and shopkeepers give them food for nothing.

Some people living in the capital, mainly those who came from the north, decided to pick up and move back north – to Soghd Province, where it was relatively quiet. Dushanbe experienced a huge influx of villagers and townspeople from the east and south of the country, where the fighting was worst. Some rented apartments, others bought them cheaply from their Russian-speaking owners who were leaving Tajikistan. Over half a million Tajiks became involuntary refugees.

When in November 1993 Dushanbe was taken by the supporters of the then-current president, the situation at the front stabilised. In fact, the war was for the most part over by the summer of 1993. However, almost a million Tajiks, mainly supporters of the opposition, found themselves abroad



in neighbouring Afghanistan. In 1997 the opposing forces signed a peace agreement. Emomali Rakhmonov, an advocate of a secular administration, became president, but the opposition too won posts in the government, and the former opposition fighters joined the army. The refugees began slowly to return from Afghanistan.

By then I was a third-year student but I had to look for work, since I wanted to help my parents and offer them at least some financial support. Their earnings weren't enough for us to live on; it was the same for most Tajik families.

My elder brother had to leave medical school and go to Russia to find work. He became an economic migrant, like almost a million other Tajiks.

Today, the country's economic situation is, of course, better than in the early 1990s. Even so, the authorities say that we won't be able to reach the economic level of 1991, the high point of the Tajik economy, until 2015.

They say that every season has its own beauty, but this is not true for me. I have recently stopped liking winter. I associate it with cold, darkness and candles. It is a time when people have to survive in conditions of extreme hardship because the country is so short of electricity. This year the winter, and especially the end of January and February, was perhaps the hardest ever. In Dushanbe we had electricity for only a few hours a day and in the regions and villages there was no electricity at all. The situation was aggravated by the fact that it was a winter of unprecedented freezing temperatures in Tajikistan.

My parents are now anxiously awaiting the birth of a new grandson. We can only pray that they don't cut off the power as he comes into the world, and that he is a healthy baby.