

Politics of Transformation and Ismailis in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan

HAFIZULLAH EMADI

He who must, must voyage forth
The world will not roll backwards
It is he who must, with one
Great gesture overtake the world.¹

Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) is a small region in the southeastern part of the Republic of Tajikistan. The inhabitants of the region are Tajiks who are more commonly known as Ghalcha, a derivative of the Persian word *Ghar*, or mountain. According to local tradition, the word Ghalcha refers to a starving crow which retreats to the mountain.² In the late sixteenth century (1572) the region was ruled by the Amir of Bukhara, Abdullah Khan and later by his step-son, Shah Kirgiz of Darwaz. In 1869 the western part of the region was occupied by the Amir of Kabul, Shir Ali Khan, who ruled Afghanistan in 1868-79.³ In 1895 the Russian and British border commission established the frontiers between Russia and Afghanistan, which remain valid to the present day.⁴ The Oxus river, for the most part, separates Gorno-Badakhshan from Badakhshan Proper, Afghanistan.

The socio-economic system in the region was reflective of traditional and sharp divisions between classes. A Soviet scholar who visited the region wrote that five levels of castes prevailed in Badakhshan. Shah, the highest caste was comprised of local rulers, the Khans (big landlords) and the Mir, who served as the Shah's agents. Seid was the second highest caste, and its members were regarded as the supreme religious authority, representing God on earth. Pir and Khalifa were the third caste. Members of this caste were responsible for religious rituals and considered to be the servants of God (Pirs are believed to be descendants of Prophet Mohammad through

¹ Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horsemen*. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), p. 17.

² Lawrence Krader, *Peoples of Central Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1963), p. 56.

³ Pavel Luknitsky, *Soviet Tajikistan* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), p. 219.

⁴ Mirza Fazlali Bek and Sang Muhammed, *Tarikh-i Badakhshan [Istoriia Badakhshana]*, edited by A. N. Boldyrev (Leningrad: Izd-vo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1959), p. 231.

his daughter Fatima, while Khalifas descended from the first three Caliphs [Abu Bakr, Omar and Usman]). The Akabir constituted the fourth caste, from whose ranks the Khans recruited their guards. The Raeyat or Faqir, mainly comprised of peasant farmers, occupied the bottom rung of this social ladder.⁵ Prior to the establishment of a socialist system in the Soviet Union, GBAO was one of the most backward regions in Central Asia. People were poor and their diet consisted of bread made from mulberry flour and *attalya*, a soup made from grasses and beans. Only the Khans could afford wheat, coffee, tea, haberdashery, scent, and cloth sold by Afghan and Indian merchants. The Khans in Gorno-Badakhshan remained subservient to the Amir of Bukhara and together they coerced the peasantry to work on their farms. The Khans' tyranny, oppression and exploitation of the peasantry instilled deep hatred among the people toward the Amir and the Khans for their exploitation and brutality. One of the methods the Khans used to execute a person sentenced to death was to tie a stone to the person's body and then throw him into the Panj river. A local song sadly depicts this heinous act:

Men are now lower than cattle.
My soul is ready to fly
Do not tie a stone to my body
What is my body, Davlat Bek.⁶

Inspired by the February 1917 Russian revolution progressives and revolutionaries fought and consolidated their power base in Shughnan and succeeded in de-linking the region from the domination of the Amir of Bukhara, confiscating his property in the Shakh-dara valley and distributing it among the peasantry in Rushan and the Hunt valley. In September the Khans forged an alliance with the Amirs of Bukhara and Afghanistan, seeking their support to help Shughnan break away from Russia. When they failed to achieve this objective they fled to British India in the autumn of 1918. In January 1919 a number of communist political leaders came to Khorog to organize people against counter-revolutionary forces, the Bas-machi group of Madamin Bek and succeeded in extending their authority over Badakhshan on 26 March 1920. It was on 30 March that year that a contingent of Bukharans fought and gained control of the region by proclaiming it a domain of the Amir. With the help of the Red Army local communists established their domination over Gorno-Badakhshan and proclaimed it an autonomous *oblast* in October 1924. Young Pamiris joined the Communist Party and formed a young communist league in Khorog, establishing their headquarters in Kishlaq-e-Porshinev, the principal base of Sayed Yusuf Ali Shah, the chief of the region.

⁵ Pavel Luknitsky, op. cit. p. 228.

⁶ Pavel Luknitsky, op. cit. p. 230.

The Emergence of Ismailism

GBAO consists of the seven districts of Shughnan, Rushan, Ishkashim, Rosht-qala, Bartang, Murghab and Vanch. The total population of the region was estimated to be 213,000 in 1996 with 149,100 (70%) of the people professing Ismailism and 63,900 (30%) adhering to the Sunni tradition of Islam. Prior to the domination of Islam in the region, the people of Shughnan and its adjacent areas practised Zoroastrianism. It is argued that Shiism spread to the region between 714 and 874.⁷ The Shiites were divided after the death of Imam Jafar Sadiq in 786. Those who followed Jafar's son Musa al-Kazim are known as Athna Asharis or "twelvers", whose twelfth Imam, the Mahdi disappeared. Shiites believe that he will return to rule the earth. Those who supported Imam Jafar's other son, Ismail, are known as Ismailis. Karim Aga Khan, a staunch advocate and practitioner of Third World development, is the 49th and present Imam of the Ismaili community.

There is no concrete evidence documenting when Ismailism spread into the region. Although Iranian Ismaili *dais* or missionaries, had been active in propagating the Ismaili doctrines in Afghanistan and its adjacent areas prior to and during the Fatimid era, it is widely believed that Ismailism gained a foothold in Badakhshan when Abu Muin Nasir-e-Khusraw, a well known Ismaili scholar and philosopher began to articulate the Ismaili faith after his return to Badakhshan from Egypt in 1052. In Egypt, Nasir-e-Khusraw met the Ismaili Imam, Al-Mustansir, and was appointed as the Hujat, or Imam's representative, of the eastern realm of the Fatimid empire.⁸ Nasir-e-Khusraw's religious teachings antagonized conservative Muslim clerics who incited people to rise against him. When he was threatened with death, Nasir-e-Khusraw sought refuge in the valley of Yumgan, where he concentrated on writing theological treatises. Nasir-e-Khusraw died around 1072-73 and was buried in the Yumgan valley. His shrine is a public gathering site for both Ismailis and non-Ismailis. The popularity of Nasir-e-Khusraw extends beyond the range of the Yumgan valley. In the Porshinev village, GBAO there is a water channel known as Chashma-e-Nasir-e-Khusraw where visitors go and pay their homage to the man they revere as a saint.⁹ The

⁷ Ole Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs: The Second Danish Expedition 1898-99* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 210.

⁸ Hafizullah Emadi, "Minority Group Politics: The Role of Ismailis in Afghanistan's Politics." *Central Asian Survey* 12:3 (1993):379-392; "The Hazaras and Their Role in the Process of Political Transformation in Afghanistan." *Central Asian Survey* 16:3 (1997):363-387.

⁹ Field work in Khorog and the Porshinev village in Tajikistan, August 1996.

consolidation and survival of Ismaili religion in the region is also due to the works of Ismaili *dais* and philosophers in the post Nasir-e-Khusraw period. Suhrah Vali Badakhshani, who elaborated the Ismaili doctrine around 856/1452, is one of the renowned Ismaili religious figures of that era. The *dais* appointed local religious leaders (*pir*) to oversee social and religious affairs of the Ismaili communities. The works produced by Ismaili theologians escaped destruction over the years by alien intruders because Ismailis preserved them in safe hide away ditches which could not easily be found by strangers. During the 1959-63 expedition Soviet researchers unearthed 50 Ismaili manuscripts in GBAO. These Persian manuscripts had been preserved by the people of Shughnan, Ghund, Bartang and Shakh-dara, and their photocopies are archived at the Oriental Studies Department of the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences in Dushanbe.¹⁰

In the early nineteenth century the Shughnanis and Rushanis often rendered their support to their co-religionists in their struggle for domination in the Wakhan region. After consolidating their power base tribal leaders, known as Shah and Mir, were chosen from privileged families in Wakhan. In the middle of the 19th century some regions in Badakhshan remained under the aegis of the Amir of Afghanistan while other regions maintained their quasi-independent status because of the region's geographical isolation from major cities. For instance, the Mir of Wakhan, Mir Rahim remained subservient to the Amir of Afghanistan and provided a tribute of slaves annually to the Amir through his governor in Qunduz. Shughnan, which included the valley of the Panj from Qala-e-Wamer to Khorog and the valleys of the rivers of Ghund and Shakh-dara, remained under the rule of Sayed Yusuf Ali Shah with his base in the Qala-e-Barpanja.¹¹

When the Amir of Afghanistan, Abd al-Rahman, led an expedition to Shughnan, he executed their leader, Shah Djahandar in the 1880s and forced his son, Sayed Yusuf Ali Shah, to seek refuge to Darwaz which was under the domain of the Amir of Bukhara. Latter, Abd al-Rahman sent a letter to Sayed Yusuf Ali Shah persuading him to return and assured his safety. When Yusuf Ali Shah returned to Shughnan he was taken hostage and sent to Kabul where he was summarily executed. Hearing of the brutality of the Amir and fearing for his life, the Shah of Wakhan, Ali Mardan Shah fled to Chitral, Pakistan when Abd al-Rahman conquered the Wakhan district. Shughnan remained under the rule of Abd al-Rahman until the Russians occupied and annexed it to Russia in 1893.¹²

¹⁰ A. Berthels & M. Baqoev, *Alphabetic Catalogue of Manuscripts discovered in 1959-63 Expedition in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast*, ed. B.G. Gafurov and A.M. Mirzoev, Moscow, 1967.

¹¹ Ole Olufsen, op. cit. p. 212.

¹² Ole Olufsen, op. cit. pp. 212-13.

The people of Shughnan trace their origins to two holy men who fled to the region in order to escape execution by the ruler of Balkh. The legend reads as follows:

In Balkh there was a large realm government by a mighty Khan. A terrible disease befell this Khan, so that two worms grew out of his shoulders, only their heads projecting, whilst their bodies remained in his body. To cure this disease and to get rid off the worms two holy men were called in, who advised him to feed the worms on human brains. This being done, the worms disappeared for a time, but returned again. A third holy man was now called in, who advised that the worms should be fed partly on dog's and partly on sheep's brains. The worms disappeared forever. The two holy men who were first called in were now afraid that they would be beheaded owing to their unsuccessful treatment, and fled into the mountains of Shughnan. The mountain Tajiks are said to be the descendants of these two men.¹³

In the early twentieth century Ismailis in GBAO managed to maintain regular contact with their Imam who settled in Bombay, India. In 1923 Sultan Mohammad Shah, the 48th Ismaili Imam, known as the Aga Khan III, sent his emissary, Pir Sabz Ali to Badakhshan (Wakhan, Shughnan, Zibak and Ishkashim), Chitral, Yasin, Punyal, Hunza, Sarikol and Yارقand to instruct the Pirs to look after the Ismailis, collect tithes and forward them to the Imam in Bombay.¹⁴ Unable to oversee every community's social and religious affairs the Pirs appointed Khalifas as their representatives in every village which had resident followers. The Pirs and Khalifas command tremendous social respect and wield significant authority in dispensing justice, resolving social, tribal and family disputes. A decade after the establishment of a socialist order in the Soviet Union Ismailis of GBAO were no longer able to continue regular contacts with their Imam. In spite of the state's anti-religious stanceduring this period, the hereditary Pirs and Khalifas continued to look after the interests of the Ismailis. The Ismailis were able to reestablish contact with their Imam after the collapse of the Soviet empire and the emergence of Tajikistan as an independent republic on 9 September 1991.

Modernization in Gorno-Badakhshan

Soon after the consolidation of the socialist system the state launched a plethora of development projects aimed at deconstructing the old polity and its corresponding cosmology by creating institutions based on socialist ide-

¹³ Ole Olufsen, op. cit. p. 210.

¹⁴ Zulfiqar Khalid, *Pakistan in the Pamir Knot* (Lahore, Pakistan: Vanguard Books Ltd., 1987), p. 21.

ology. To achieve this objective the state built seven elementary schools and two boarding schools in GBAO, a school for children in Rushan and Khorog, and a hospital in Khorog. GBAO's primordial economy and way of life was transformed and modernized to the extent that in 1928-34 there were a silkworm factory, a leather factory and a hydro-electric power station in Khorog.¹⁵ The state collectivized agricultural land and permitted individual families to own up to two hectares of agricultural land. In addition they were permitted limited private ownership of livestock, private homes and small private garden plots.

In GBAO the Shughni language, regarded as a dialect of the Persian language, had been used as a *lingua franca* among virtually all people residing in the regions of Ishkashim, Shughnan, Rushan, Bartang, Yazgul and Wakhan. To improve literacy throughout the region the Soviet government replaced the Arabic with the Roman script in 1929, on the grounds that the former was too difficult to learn and also because the Roman script was considered a more effective for culturally and linguistically integrating the Central Asian republics in Soviet culture and in reducing the influence of Middle Eastern culture and politics in the region. In 1940 the Roman script was replaced with the Cyrillic script to further establish Soviet cultural and political hegemony in the region.¹⁶

The domination of socialist politics, culture and morality in GBAO required the establishment of a mechanism to break the region's geographical isolation and link it to cosmopolitan centers in Central Asia and Russia. To achieve this objective the Soviet Union built the 567 km Great Pamir Highway in 1940 linking Khorog, the administrative center of GBAO, with the capital of the republic, Dushanbe. In 1943 the Soviets built a radio station providing people in Khorog, Rushan, Vanch and other counties of the Pamir valley with access to news broadcasts from most parts of the Soviet Union. The broadcasts were also published in the local newspaper, Badakhshan-e-Surkh.¹⁷ GBAO, once considered one of the most backward regions in the Soviet Union, was gradually modernized and integrated in Soviet culture. Soviet national assimilation policy forced a significant number of Ismailis to leave their enclaves in GBAO and resettle in Samarqand, Bukhara, Dushanbe and elsewhere in the Central Asian republics. By 1961 approximately 11 % of the GBAO population resided in urban areas (see table 1).

¹⁵ Pavel Luknitsky, op. cit. pp.236-37.

¹⁶ Hafizullah Emadi, "State, Ideology and Islamic Resurgence in Tadjikistan." *Central Asian Survey*, 13:4 (1994):565-573.

¹⁷ W. P. and Zelda K. Crates. *Soviets in Central Asia* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1952), p. 152.

Table 1: Estimated Population of Gorno-Badakhshan, 1961

Total	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
80,000	9,000	71,000	11 %	89 %

Source: Lawrence Krader, *Peoples of Central Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 235

Although development and modernization in GBAO under Soviet rule resulted in Soviet cultural domination, the disaffirmation of Tajik identity, the disintegration of traditional socio-economic structures exemplified in the coerced relocation of some Badakhshanis in the 1940s and 1950s, Ismaili intellectuals hailed such a development as a road to their entry into the modern world. A well known Ismaili poet, Mirsaid Mirshakar, a Stalin poetry prize winner, depicted Soviet-style modernization as a miracle. In his work, *The Golden Village*, he narrates the tale of several Tajik peasants who travelled far distances in search of a perfect society. One returned and to his amazement finds that his hometown has gone through wondrous changes. He is convinced that the perfect society that he was searching for is here in Gorno-Badakhshan. His son greets him by telling him that:

You are at home. And all you see around
 The wreaths of roses and cotton in the fields
 And each new home, new fruits brought off the earth
 Is the result of our will and work.
 This is no paradise. Each step was hard.
 The Golden Village not yet wholly built.
 But now we know the road straight into the golden future.¹⁸

The socialist system that dominated every aspect of societal development had provided employment and social services on a very egalitarian scale. By 1950 there were 240 schools in GBAO, a pedagogical institute in Khorog, 19 hospitals and polyclinics, three malaria dispensaries, two regional and one district newspapers: *The Rushan-e-Surkh*, the *Haqiqat-e-Vanch*, and the *Bairaq-e-Surkh*. Young people from the Pamir valley were sent to study at the Tajik State University and other institutions of higher education in the Soviet Union and to become scientists and civil service officers. In the 1980s it was estimated that 99 % of the population in GBAO are literate. Female enrolment in education exceeds male enrolment.

¹⁸ Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, *Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia: The Case of Tadzhikistan* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 257.

Women in GBAO are comparatively progressive and, unlike women in more conservative Muslim societies, they do not cover their faces when they speak to men or work in their presence. It is estimated that one third of the people of GBAO have college degrees. It is obvious to anyone visiting the region that Soviet development policies have transformed Kharog into a relatively modern society. In Pamir the villages have electricity, enabling people to have access to radio, television, telephones and refrigerators of functional quality. There is no significant disparity in the distribution of wealth among the people. Even positions of power in the state and civil service sectors did not produce significant disparities in wealth.

Although the standard of living of the people in GBAO is relatively higher than that of average rural families in India and Pakistan and other Third World countries, Badakhshanis became disenchanted with the Soviet government for not doing more to further improve their standard of living, as they had always compared themselves not with other Third World countries but with the West. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979 - February 1989, a number of young Ismailis had been forcibly sent to Afghanistan to fight against the insurgents and support the Soviet-backed government of Presidents Babrak Karmal and Najibullah. A few Ismaili elites opposed the war in Afghanistan on the basis of conscientious objection feeling, that it was immoral to fight their co-religionists. The majority of conscripts who were dispatched to Afghanistan did not have any idea what was going on in the country or why the Soviets were there, save the official Soviet version that they were fulfilling their proletarian internationalist duty toward Afghanistan. As casualties increased and the coffins of 24 Badakhshani Ismailis were returned home, the Ismailis began to see Soviet policy in a new light; most Ismailis became discontented with the system as the war dragged on in Afghanistan.¹⁹

Gorno-Badakhshan in the Post-Soviet Era

Since Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast is a mountainous region, isolated from much of Tajikistan, it had become dependent on other Soviet Central Asian republics for consumer goods. In the 1980s agricultural productivity declined in GBAO due to the failing Soviet economy, lack of new investment and the inability of the state to provide *sovkhos* and *kholkhoz* farmers with modern agricultural equipment. To ameliorate the situation

¹⁹ Discussion with an Ismaili elite who wished to remain anonymous, Khorog, Tajikistan, August 1996.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev initiated Perestroika and Glasnost, which eventually led to the independence of the Central Asian republics. Although Tajikistan was declared an independent state in 1991, it remained a member of the Commonwealth of Independent states (CIS). Tajikistan's various ethnic, religious and political organizations, espousing different ideologies for political and socio-economic development, began to redefine their internal and external alignment. Internal political struggle in Tajikistan provided the opportunity for ousted President Rahman Nabiev to build an alliance with opposition forces to defeat President Kakher Makhkamov during the 1991 presidential election. As a result Makhkamov was ousted during a palace coup organized by supporters of Nabiev, who managed to gain 60 % of the votes cast in the 24 November 1991 election.²⁰

The opposition accused Nabiev of vote rigging and fraud and demanded his resignation. They organized demonstrations in Dushanbe and Qurghunteppe on 22-23 March 1992. The government declared the demonstrations to be illegal on the grounds that their organizers had failed to notify the government ten days in advance. Despite the state ban on public protest and rallies the opposition groups continued their anti-state activities, which finally led to an armed confrontation with state security forces in August-September 1992. It is estimated that 50,000 people lost their lives, 150,000 people fled the country, 60,000 to Afghanistan and the rest to other CIS countries, and more than 35,000 homes were destroyed, displacing an estimated 70,000 people throughout Tajikistan.²¹ Democratic presidential candidate Davlat Khudanazar, a prominent Ismaili from Gorno-Badakhshan, was forced to leave Tajikistan and settled in Moscow (Russia) after spending a few years in the United States. The government in Dushanbe cordoned off the region on the grounds that it was necessary to control the movement of the opposition armed groups. The result was the near starvation of the people of GBAO. Opposition political parties remained defiant of the central government and pledged to continue their struggle for the establishment of a broad-based government. Although opposition parties espouse various ideologies, they are united in a common struggle against the leadership in Dushanbe (see Table 2). The opposition parties wield considerable influence over the rural population. Their limited resources and lack of organizational experience however constituted their "Achilles heel" in negotiations with the central government.

²⁰ Hafizullah Emadi, "State, Ideology and Islamic Resurgence in Tajikistan." *Central Asian Survey*, op. cit.

²¹ Discussion with Ismaili intellectuals and government officials in Khorog, Tajikistan, August 1966.

Table 2: Political Parties and their Professed Political Ideology

The Communist Party (Tajik Socialist Party or TSP)
<i>Ideology:</i> Quasi-communism
<i>Head:</i> Shodi Shabdolov
The Tajik Democratic Party (TDP)
<i>Ideology:</i> Political Pluralism
<i>Head:</i> Shodmon Yusuf
Rastakhiz Movement (Resurgence)
<i>Ideology:</i> Islamic Liberalism
<i>Head:</i> Tahir Abdul Jabbar
The Islamic Revival Party (IRP)
<i>Ideology:</i> Conservative Islam
<i>Head:</i> Sharif Himotzadah
Lale Badakhshan Society (The Rubies of Badakhshan)
<i>Ideology:</i> Irredentism demanding greater autonomy for Gorno-Badakhshan
<i>Head:</i> Atobek Amirbek

Source: Hafizullah Emadi, "State, Ideology and Islamic Resurgence in Tajikistan." *Central Asian Survey* 13:4 (1994):565-573

Growing opposition forced Nabyev to resign in November 1992 and the Islamic coalition forces under the leadership of Akbarsho Iskanderov formed a provisional government. The struggle between supporters of the old order and the Islamists continued, leading to the victory of the former. Emomali Rakhmanov assumed power with the help of the Kulyabi militia and in November 1994 was elected as the new president of the country, receiving 60% of the votes cast. As happened with his predecessor, opposition parties accused Rakhmanov of vote rigging and fraud. Although political parties are active throughout Tajikistan, most Ismailis remained supportive of the central government in Dushanbe. A segment of Ismailis supports the IRP and those in GBAO rally around the political platform of the Lale Badakhshan, pleading for greater autonomy for their hometown. Those among the Tajik opposition who sought refuge in the northern part of Afghanistan have continuously clashed with government troops trying to topple the government in Dushanbe. President Rakhmanov also supported the presence of 25,000 Russian soldiers in Tajikistan to help the state in safeguarding its borders from intrusion by the Afghanistan-based Tajik opposition parties.

There have been sporadic confrontations in GBAO between the Tajik opposition parties and the Russian border guards. Majnun, commander of the "Pamir Self-defense" in eastern Tajikistan said that if the government troops and Russian border guards did not pull out of the region they would be bogged down in a position similar to the 10-year war of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.²² The majority of people in Khorog dislike the ongoing armed confrontation and are calling upon Majnun to leave Khorog. However, Majnun claims to have the support of the people. During a skirmish between opposition and government troops in Barchit, six miles north of Khorog and overlooking the Panj river marking the border with Afghanistan, one local resident was killed along with five border guards and five rebels. Aid workers said that the local population, which has no access to food and medicine, overwhelmingly expressed their opposition to the rebels and wanted stability so that supplies could reach them from Osh, Kyrgyzstan, which is 470 miles or a three-day mountain drive to Khorog.²³

Although the United Nations is seeking a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict in Tajikistan and the UN special envoy Ramiro Piriz-Ballon of Uruguay is shuttling between Tajikistan and Moscow, no concrete results have yet been achieved. Andrai Nikolayev, director of Russia's Federal Border Service, tried to use the Aga Khan's influence and authority in maintaining peace and stability in GBAO, where the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants are Ismailis. During a meeting the participants discussed various aspects of development in Tajikistan and the Aga Khan pledged that his foundation would do everything it can to promote peace and stability in the country.²⁴

The Aga Khan Foundation and the Transformation of Gorno-Badakhshan

The emergence of various political parties and the ensuing battle for political power in 1992 which paralyzed the state, disrupted economic productivity, and caused widespread starvation led several international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to provide humanitarian aid to Tajikistan. One of the INGOs working in Tajikistan is the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF). AKF, which has offices in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Canada,

²² Douglas Busvine, "Tajik Opposition Fighter Threatens New Afghanistan." *Reuters North American Wire*, April 23, 1995.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Anatoly Yurkin, "Tajik Residents to Help Russian Border guards." *The Russian Information Agency ITAR-TASS*, February 1, 1995.

Switzerland, Kenya, Portugal, Tanzania, Uganda, the United Kingdom and the United States, has established a branch office in Dushanbe and has engaged in development programs since 1992. It has been at the forefront of development and support of innovative solutions to meeting three essential human needs: health, education and improvements in the quality of life. AKF's main development program in Tajikistan is concentrated in the region around the GBAO.

To mitigate the suffering of the people caused by shortages in food production, AKF organized the collection and delivery of humanitarian aid which included flour, powdered milk, and oil, donated principally by the United States. Commenting on the humanitarian aid for the people in the Pamir valley, Mirzohalal Shojamolov said that "we are alive only because of humanitarian aid ... We live on flour sent from America. The people who are coming here from the West have a noble goal ... to keep us from dying out from the face of the earth. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts."²⁵ Although AKF is not a relief organization, it soon began to engage in rural development programs in the region and in 1992 established a local NGO known as the Pamir Relief and Development Program (PRDP) in Khorog whose prime directive is to monitor the distribution of humanitarian aid and to initiate programs to mitigate the process of privatization and free market economy.

Since its establishment PRDP has monitored the distribution of more than 60,000 tons of humanitarian aid and has been engaged in testing agricultural technology to increase agricultural productivity. Its long-term strategic objectives are:

- to improve the quality of life of people in the remote and poor areas in the mountains of Gorno-Badakhshan;
- to develop institutional and technical models for equitable and sustainable rural and small business development, and,
- to develop and implement sustainable, long term strategies for productive management of natural resources in the dry and fragile mountain environment.²⁶

PRDP has a staff of 56 persons with a representative in each district to oversee humanitarian aid distribution. PRDP's staff budget for the fiscal year of 1996 was estimated to be US \$ 49,000. Realization of the PRDP agricultural program's objective of facilitating self-sufficiency of the people in GBAO within eight to ten years, will require:

²⁵ Kathy Lally, "Famine, Then Feast for the Tajik Muslim Sect." *The Sun* (Baltimore), 4 June 1995, p.1A.

²⁶ The Aga Khan Foundation Progress Report on Tajikistan, 1996.

- the re-allocation of arable land from fodder production to grain production,
- the transfer of land management from the *sovkhoz* to private management of state farmlands by individual private farmers, and
- the introduction into the agricultural sector of improved technology derived from the "Green Revolution" research in the West over the last fifty years.²⁷

PRDP provides consultation to farmers in the use and adaptation of High Yielding Wheat varieties (HYV) tested in Pakistan under climatic conditions similar to that of the GBAO. Mahmood Osmanzai, an Afghan national with ten years of experience in developing nations has been an agricultural consultant to the PRDP since 1994. During a discussion regarding adaptation of new improved agricultural seeds Osmanzai highlighted the experiment in Rosht-qala district where the seeding time was not too late for a fair evaluation; 41 hectares of land were seeded using HYV, referred to as "Mahmoodi". Grown on the privately managed farms, this variety produced 128% more grain than local varieties grown in the neighboring *sovkhoz*.²⁸

To ensure sustained food production requires bringing more new lands under crop cultivation through the construction of new agricultural channels and privatization programs. Since the beginning of agricultural reform in the GBAO there has been an increase in area under food crop production, yet a decline in the total production area. The decline portends the failure of the *sovkhoz* in planting while the increased area under food crop production is due to privatization of farm lands (see table 3).

Table 3: Agricultural production area (ha) in Gorno-Badakhshan, 1990-95

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Total Area	18,232	18,208	17,661	15,979	15,596	13,905
Cereals/ pulses	3,091	3,899	4,599	5,409	5,663	5,978

Source: Mahmood Osmanzai, "First Quarterly Report." (Unpublished), 1 January-31 March 1996. 3 pp.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Discussion with Mahmood Osmanzai, PRDP's agricultural advisor, Khorog, Tajikistan, August 1996.

With the approval of the local government PRDP has tried to assist farmers in obtaining land from districts and the *sovkhos* and to provide them with technical advice and inputs on an in-kind credit basis. Although private ownership of the land is not considered important by the PRDP, private management is essential for stability in the process of transformation of the GBAO's economy. PRDP maintains that farmers must be in a position to decide what to plant and how to sell the product to anyone at a price that is negotiated between the seller and the buyer, without undue interference by the central government. Farmers must demonstrate their desire to become private land owners by initiating negotiations for the land, and by paying the cost of the input (seeds, fertilizers, and diesel). This negotiation would be backed by written agreements with the PRDP to repay a fixed amount of wheat from what is produced at the end of the harvest season.²⁹ PRDP maintains that in the future such services to the farmers could be provided by and negotiated with private traders and businessmen. By these practices PRDP intends to instill the very important concepts of contract and payment for services, so unfamiliar to the Tajik tradition, and thus begin to prepare the people for an environment where private business could flourish.

For such projects to progress political stability is required. To accomplish this objective President Rakhmanov extended an official invitation to Karim Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili community, to visit Tajikistan in order to use his influence and resources to restore stability in the primarily Ismaili settled region of GBAO. In May 1995 Aga Khan visited Tajikistan and held meetings with President Rakhmanov and top government officials on ways and means of helping Tajikistan to restore stability and march toward a free market economy. On May 24 Aga Khan visited Khorog, where he met government and civic leaders. Regarding the prospect for economic and social transformation in GBAO, Aga Khan indicated that he would assist by conducting feasibility studies for constructing a highway linking the region to Afghanistan and Pakistan via the Wakhan corridor. In a speech he highlighted the significance of regional development:

The viability of Gorno-Badakhshan depends on the development of regional linkages that would open markets, facilitate the creation of commercial and social service systems, allow advantage to be taken of complementarities of resources among neighbors and expand the range of opportunities for using, for example, the impressive human resources of the Autonomous Oblast. If Gorno-Badakhshan and its neighbors look only inward, the possibilities for future development are severely constrained; if they look outward, much more is possible.³⁰

²⁹ The Aga Khan Foundation Progress Report on Tajikistan, 1996.

³⁰ "Aga Khan Visits Development Projects in Gorno-Badakhshan". *PR Newswire Association, Inc.* May 26, 1995.

Aga Khan also addressed a crowd of an estimated 50,000 Ismailis in the Porshinev valley. He appealed to the people to resolve their political differences through dialogue and respect law and order, without which no common framework is possible for mutual trust and confidence. Aga Khan also urged people of other religious persuasions to restrain from the use of violence to resolve differences. Referring to conflicts and armed confrontations in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Burundi, Aga Khan stated that:

Essential to the creation of a higher order of human relationships is the acceptance of pluralism ... Within the Muslim world, for example, thoughtful and heartfelt differences exist in regard to the interpretation of the faith. Nothing is gained by imposing one interpretation upon people disposed to another. ... Indeed, the effect of such coercion is a denial of the principles of the faith. Religious plurality in the Ummah is a tribute to the richness of the faith, and a source of its strength. Shia and Sunni can co-exist and cooperate, true to their own interpretations of Islam but confederates in the faith. Similarly, people of particular ethnic, cultural or political groups must grow beyond narrow conceptions of clan rivalry to an acceptance of differences. Human genius is found in its variety, which is a work of Allah.³¹

Ismailis were elated and inspired to so see their Imam after so many years of virtual isolation from the rest of the Ismaili community. Commenting on the occasion of his visit to Khorog, a 50-year old Ismaili school teacher, Sangmamat Gulmammadov said that "this is a great moment for us and our children. None of our ancestors ever saw him. We are the first."³²

One of the major development projects of the AKF in the GBAO is the completion of the first phase of the Pamir Hydroelectric station, helping the Pamiris to restore their past industrial strength. During the Soviet period the Pamir's energy needs were met by diesel fuelled generators. After the collapse of the Soviet system and subsequent decline in economic productivity in Tajikistan, lack of access to diesel fuel supplies in the GBAO in the winters of 1992 and 1993 brought trucks, cars, buses, tractors, etc. to a standstill. People had been forced to plow the land with oxen and to chop down trees to replace their diesel fuel. It is estimated that 5% of Tajikistan's trees, including fruit trees, were cut down during this period. The completion and modernization of the Pamir Hydroelectric station will service the demands of the local population as well as meet the increased needs after the establishment of industrial and commercial enterprises.

Another AKF project in GBAO concerns the expansion and modernization of the newly established University of Khorog to enable the training of a new generation of cadres to guide the community into the next century. In

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kathy Lally, "Famine, Then Feast for Tajik Muslim Sect." *The Sun* (Baltimore), 4 June 1995, p. 1A.

so doing the AKF provides modern technology, educational materials and religious text books and volunteer teaching cadres to teach at elementary and public schools. During Aga Khan's visit to the University of Khorog, where he spoke to the students and faculty members, Persian poetry was recited in his honor. Aga Khan expressed keen interest in providing aid to the university. After listening to Aga Khan's speech at the University Navruz, who left his studies in Dushanbe due to escalating tensions two years ago, said that "everyone is happy and says that our bodies have been cleansed of sin after seeing our Imam."³³ Aga Khan's support for science and the development of educational institutions has its roots in the Ismaili tradition of the Fatimid era. The Ismaili contribution to science and education is exemplified in the building of the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, when they seized state power in Egypt in 975. With the collapse of their rule in Egypt the center of Ismaili activities shifted to Iran when Hasan al-Sabbah seized the Alamut fort in northern Iran and consolidated the base of the Nizari Ismailis in 1090-91. The onslaught of the Mongol invasion resulted in the destruction of the Ismaili center in 1256. Bereft of a center in the post-Alamut period, the Ismailis re-emerged as an economic force in the immediate post-World War II period under the astute leadership of Sultan Mohammad Shah, the 48th Ismaili Imam and his successor Karim Aga Khan, the 49th present Imam of the community, with the expansion of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and their involvement in rural development in the developing world. At present Central Asian Ismailis reside in regions which include territories such as Sinkiang in China, the Northern Areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran where they are a minority community and subjected to the Shia and Sunni legal traditions. The Ismailis constituted the majority in Khorog and have achieved a higher level of education than those who settled in the neighboring countries. With their social and educational infrastructure and the support of the AKDN the Ismailis in Khorog could thus play a leading role as the new center of Ismaili activities in the twenty first century.

Conclusion

In the Soviet era Gorno-Badakhshan received Soviet support in education, health care, housing and other amenities of life, similar to that received throughout the rest of the Soviet Union. The people of Badakhshan are indebted to Lenin's socialism for transforming their primordial economy and enhancing their standard of living. However, development strategies pur-

³³ Ian Macwilliam, "Saint in a Silver Mercedes." *The Observer*, June 4, 1995, p. 18.

sued by the Soviet state in the early 1960s did not ensure sustainability and a sound social and economic development, but rather made the region dependent on the Soviet Union. The demise of the Soviet Union, the ensuing civil strife in the newly established Republic of Tajikistan, and the disruption of communications and transportation brought misery of untold proportions to the people in GBAO. The Aga Khan stepped in, instructing the AKF to organize distribution centers for humanitarian aid. The people needed a savior and inspiration in their time of need and are much obliged and grateful to the Imam of the time, the Aga Khan, for delivering them from the misery and starvation inflicted upon them by a bitter civil war and for leading them forward into the twenty-first century.

The process of capitalist-oriented development in the GBAO has been hailed by most residents of the Pamir valley. After a bitter civil war, disruption of economic activity and lack of improved seeds and services, agricultural productivity declined severely in *sovkhos* and *kholkhoz* farming lands. The provision of technical aid (fertilizers, seeds, etc.) by the PRDP to a few privately-managed farms in GBAO led to a 128 % increase in wheat production and an 86 % increase in the potato crop.³⁴ This trend of development would further encourage privatization of agricultural land if agricultural technology and inputs are made available to the farmers. The growing possibility of constructing a highway that links GBAO to Afghanistan and Pakistan via the Wakhan corridor breaks the region's geographical isolation and paves the way for a free market economy, with its corresponding ideology, politics and culture. Badakhshanis who remained dependent on the Soviet Union for economic and technical aid will not become dependent on capitalist economies and INGOs if participatory long-term sustainable development is the focus of development priorities. The people in the region could take a great leap towards integrating themselves in the world of the next century and lead a socially equitable life provided that AKF continues to engage in long-term, people-centered sustainable development programs and encourages greater local initiatives and grass-roots participation in the decision-making process as well as in project implementation. Otherwise there will be no significant change in the GBAO except a shift in the dependency relationship.

The author would like to express his gratitude to the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) for sponsoring a field visit to Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan and Badakhshan, Afghanistan in July-August 1996 and to the editorial board members of the Internationales Asienforum for their remarks on the earlier version of this article.

³⁴ Discussion with Mahmood Osmanzai, Khorog, Tajikistan, August 1996.