

Tajikistan bucks the trend in Central Asia

Not all the news from Central Asia is about rigged elections, the torture of dissidents, massacres of civilians and economic decline. On the far edge of the Central Asia landmass, amid the rugged Pamir mountains, Tajikistan is trying to open its borders to serve as a new route for north-south trade, while allowing Islamists and Communists to sit in Parliament.

There are still some restrictions on political freedom in Tajikistan, but compared with its Central Asian neighbors it is providing a model of political maturity. In 1997 the United Nations brokered a peace deal to end a four-year civil war that had claimed 50,000 of Tajikistan's six million people. Western promises of substantial aid to help the country recover never materialized. Grinding poverty and economic decline followed, with 600,000 Tajiks leaving to seek work in Russia. The local drugs mafia traded heroin freely with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

All that is now in the past, and Dushanbe, the capital, is showing signs of prosperity. For the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, people are actually smiling, despite the shortage of electricity and the biting cold. Tajikistan's economy is growing at the rate of 8 percent a year, workers are returning from Russia, foreign investment in the mining industry is up and, since 9/11, so is Western aid.

Even though 100 tons of heroin still cross the Afghan-Tajik border annually, destined for Europe, the government has sponsored a popular campaign among mothers and teenagers to combat drug abuse — the first of its kind in Central Asia. The United Na-

tions has helped establish an antinarcotics unit in the government, which is the least corrupt in the region. And the European Union, the United States, Russia and China are helping to fund and arm a new Tajik force on the Afghan border to keep drugs out.

Like other Central Asian autocrats, President Emomali Rakhmanov has been castigated for unfair elections and harassment of those who do not toe the government line, but he tolerates an opposition that includes members of the Islamic Renaissance Party who fought in the civil war against him.

The Islamic Renaissance Party has two seats in Parliament and its deputy chairman, Mobeiyuddin Kabiri, speaks of an evolution toward a more Islamic society, rather than a revolution, and sympathizes with the difficult balancing act that Rakhmanov has to manage. The other Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, are livid that Tajikistan's president allows Islamists to sit in Parliament.

But what is really making the rest of the world sit up and take notice, from Brussels to Beijing, is Tajikistan's swiftly changing geopolitical situation.

Tajikistan is landlocked, with China and Afghanistan to the south and east and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to the north. For a long time Uzbekistan offered the only trade route out to Russia and the West, but the Uzbeks have ruthlessly mined the border, ostensibly to stop Islamic extremists but in reality to put the pressure on Tajikistan to toe the Uzbek line.

Now China has built a new road linking Xinjiang, its

westernmost province, with Tajikistan. That means a new trade outlet for Tajikistan. In addition, the Americans are building a bridge across the Amu Darya River, which divides Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Once the bridge is completed, China's new road will allow China and Tajikistan to send goods through Afghanistan to Pakistan's southern ports. Imports into Central Asia can also travel this new route. From Dushanbe they can be distributed to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China.

Tajikistan also stands to gain if regional trade increases. A new report by the UN Development Program says that Central Asia could double its regional trade by reducing artificial trade barriers and loss-making protectionism. That would also help to lower the smuggling and drugs trade that accounts for 40 percent of Central Asia's economies.

Meanwhile, the United States, Russia and China are vying for military bases in Tajikistan. Rakhmanov is playing his hand adroitly. The Russians have an air base, and so does France, under the auspices of NATO.

Tajikistan is still weak and poor, however, and will not be able to progress further unless the political habits of other Central Asian leaders change and the West is willing to be more liberal with its aid.

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