The system of social identities in Tajikistan: Early warning and conflict prevention

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the interconnections between social identities (ethnic, national, regional and religious) and conflict intentions in Tajikistan. Based on the analysis of the dynamics of identity-based conflicts, the paper emphasizes the importance of an early warning system that centers on social identity and shows what impact such factors as national identity building, religious identity revival, and regional identity reinforcement have on processes of conflict prevention, resolution, and reconciliation. Through the examination of the components of the model, including such factors as intergroup prejudice, outgroup threat, identity salience, ingroup primacy, forms of social identity, and modes of identity meaning, the author shows the main threats to peaceful co-existence in Tajikistan.
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According to the Tajikistani President, Emomali Rahmonov, the post-conflict reconstruction period in the country has come to an end in December 2006. He declared that during a 10-year period of recovery the goals of overcoming the consequences of the Civil War of 1992–1997 and constructing a peaceful society

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were generally achieved, and that contemporary Tajikistani society does not harbor any reasons for conflict. What are the real conditions of relations between different regions and political groups in Tajikistan? How do different social identities, including religious, ethnic, national and regional, shape the future of Tajikistan? Will this country face new conflicts or enjoy peaceful co-existence? This paper explores this problem by applying the early-warning model of identity-based conflicts (Korostelina, 2007).

The identity-based conflicts are described as protracted, "deep-rooted conflicts" resting on underlying needs that cannot be compromised (Burton, 1987, 1990; Azar, 1990; Rothman, 1997). They are provoked by the frustration of basic needs along with a denial of human rights (Fisher, 1997) and reflect the level of responsiveness of major "communal groups" (ethnic, national, religious) to the needs of other groups in society. Rothman further develops the concept of identity-based conflict and stresses that these conflicts "are deeply rooted in the underlying individual human needs and values that together constitute people's social identities, particularly in the context of group affiliations, loyalties, and solidarity" (Rothman, 1997: 6). Many ignored or unresolved interest-based conflicts can be developed into identity conflicts, and involve issues of dignity, identity, pride and group loyalty. Among factors that inflame identity-based conflict are group identity, development and mobilization, the formation of political goals of autonomy, secession, limited access to power and resources (Azar, 1990; Kriesberg, 2003). Once social identity becomes involved in interest-based or instrumental conflict, it then entirely changes the dynamic and structure of conflict, making it protracted and deeply rooted.

As a result of the co-existence in multicultural communities, ethnic and religious groups develop intergroup stereotypes and beliefs. These beliefs can be formed through historical experience, and they often include chosen traumas and glories. They can also be the result of favorable comparisons, prejudice, and attribution errors, where outgroups are perceived as cunning, artful, cruel, mean, and aggressive. In situations of the competition for power or resources, group leaders use these stereotypes and beliefs as well as ingroup loyalties as tools for group mobilization. These identities are connected to economic and political interests, and they reinforce negative perceptions of outgroup members, attributing aggressive goals to them. Perceived external threat, especially in the circumstance of lack of information, strengthens these feelings of insecurity among ingroup members. The ingroup identity becomes more salient and mobilized, and finally dominant, consequently influencing the development of the dual "positive **we**-negative **they**" perception. In the perception of ingroup members, the outgroup is devalued, dehumanized, and turned into a homogenous evil. It becomes moral and honorable to take actions against the outgroup and totally destroy it. These actions are, in turn, perceived by the outgroup as threatening, resulting in the development of counter-actions, causing a new turn in the spiral of conflict and violence.

In spite of the essential role of social identity in the development of conflicts, this concept is barely presented among indicators of the majority of early warning systems. Based on the collection and analysis of specific indicators, the early warning systems help to anticipate the escalation of violent conflict, produce best and worst-case