

The tribes of Central Asia predate the formation of the Soviet Union. They exercised influence in the five Soviet Central Asian Republics throughout the duration of the U.S.S.R. From the rubble of the collapsed Soviet Union, the tribes emerged as the source of power and legitimacy in the newly independent republics of Central Asia, writes Joseph E Fallon..

After Islam, tribes form the primary basis of self-identification for the local population. The tribal system of Central Asia is vertical, and, therefore, fluid. It enables an individual to have four levels of identity. There is the tribe. Above the tribe is the tribal confederation. Below the tribes are the clans of which the tribe is composed. Finally, there is the region of the country, which is the "home" of the clan or tribe.

While kingdoms and empires rose to dominate Central Asia, only to vanish, some within a single generation, the tribes remained. They offered obeisance, often reluctantly, to these various states, then lived as they had for centuries according to their own laws, and customs. The emergence of "the state" transformed tribes into non-state actors living as veritable "states" within the state.

The armies of numerous empire builders have swept across Central Asia. Among the most famous were Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and Stalin. Each defeated the tribes, but none conquered the tribes.

Each sought to integrate the tribes into their respective administrations of Central Asia. Stalin, in particular, utilized the system of "divide and rule". He fostered and exploited rivalries among the clans and tribes to successfully consolidate Moscow's control over the region.

Stalin had two objectives in Central Asia. First was the "collectivization" of the land and the "sedentarization" of the population. Second was the replacement of the clans and tribes with Soviet designated nations -- Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek. These nations would eliminate tribal culture, as well as tribal identity, by having Soviet republics that would be "national in form, socialist in content".

Ironically, by pitting clan against clan and tribe against tribe to maintain Moscow's control over

the region, Stalin preserved tribal identity and prevented the emergence of the national identity he sought. This contradictory policy was continued by his successors.

In the 1980s, famed, French, Sovietologist, Alexandre Bennigsen noted "three levels of self-identity existed in Soviet Central Asia: tribal, religious and national with the last being the weakest."

At the same time, the tribes of Central Asia exploited the Soviet system and fostered rivalries among Moscow officials to advance their interests. This was achieved most notably in Uzbekistan.

The U.S. Library of Congress noted; "As Uzbeks were beginning to gain leading positions in society, they also were establishing or reviving unofficial networks based on regional and clan loyalties...An extreme example of this phenomenon occurred under the leadership of Sharaf Rashidov, who was first secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan from 1959 to 1982. During his tenure, Rashidov brought numerous relatives and associates from his native region into government and party leadership positions...In this way, Rashidov was able to initiate efforts to make Uzbekistan less subservient to Moscow. As became apparent after his death, Rashidov's strategy had been to remain a loyal ally of Leonid I. Brezhnev, leader of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982, by bribing high officials of the central government." . Among those Moscow officials was Brezhnev's son-in-law. He was arrested -- after Brezhnev died -- and found guilty of accepting a million dollars in bribes.

In the end, the Soviet Union collapsed. But what emerged as its political successors in Central Asia were not the Soviet engineered "nations", but the historic clans and tribes.

Professor Francesc Serra Massansalvador wrote in his 2010 work, "The Process of Nation Building in Central Asia and its Relationship to Russia's Regional Influence":

"The concept of nation as usually defined is barely relevant to the reality of Central Asia in 1991...The former Soviet space, and most notably Central Asia, has witnessed the beginning of a process of nation building, which had already occurred in many other parts of the world in the past two centuries. The interest in the process of this region lies in the fact that it happened relatively late, without a previously defined strategy coming from the political and intellectual

elites and under adverse conditions (economic crisis, lack of popular enthusiasm or external support). Moreover, in Central Asia there is a lack of nationalist traditions not only in the classical sense which we give to the term in Europe, but also as an identification with any established national group...."

Official proclamations to the contrary, the political systems that emerged in the five former Soviet Central Asian republics were not based upon national identity. The successor states have been described as "personal dictatorships," "authoritarian presidentialisms," "neopatrimonial" and "sultanistic" regimes." Alexander Morrison, Professor of History at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, described the spectrum of these regimes as ranging from the authoritarianism in Uzbekistan under late President Islam Karimov to "Turkmenistan's closed neo-Stalinist system, Tajikistan's kleptocracy, Kyrgyzstan's fragile parliamentary liberalism and Kazakhstan's dictatorship of technocrats."

While these regimes have publicly sought to establish their legitimacy by appeals to "nationalism", Robert Kaplan writes they "rebuild, even reinvent, a national past out of preconceived myths, compounded by the historical erasures of communism." The late scholar Professor Edward A. Allworth of Columbia University, observed "[T]oday in Central Asia, nationalities are being created retrospectively. And not always accurately: Statues of Tamerlane are going up in Uzbekistan to honor an 'Uzbek national hero', even though Tamerlane was not an Uzbek. In truth, it was the Uzbeks who toppled Tamerlane's dynasty..."

The five former Soviet republics of Central Asia are states without nations. The republics are political arenas in which tribes compete to retain or seize control of the state apparatus. They consist of three "wealthy" states – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and two "poor" states – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The former have significant reserves of oil and/or natural gas, the latter do not. Each, however, is defined by its clans and tribes.

The importance of clan and tribal identity is evident on the "national" flags of three of the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia. The symbolism is most conspicuous on the flag of Turkmenistan. Arranged prominently along the hoist of that flag are the five traditional carpet motifs signifying the five tribes of Turkmenistan: Teke, Yomut, Saryk, Chowdur, and Arsary. Kazakhstan's flag displays a stylized golden steppe eagle, a symbol of its tribes. While the flag of Kyrgyzstan features a sun with 40 rays representing the historic number of tribes of the country.

In a 2009 seminar held at Chatham House entitled "The Politics of Decision-Making in Central Asia", a speaker described the fluidity of clan identity and the reality of clan power, which is just as pertinent today:

"...clans are informal networks of particularistic ties, based on kin, fictive kin (e.g. marriage, mahalla ["autonomous social institutions built around familial ties and Islamic rituals"]), and close, trusted friendships (made through school, university, village, mahalla, or sometimes long-standing business relationships). Clans involve elements of patronage, nepotism, clientelism and corruption, but clan members also have a strong sense of shared identity, and their actions are shaped by communal norms and interests...Clan affiliation or loyalty becomes the key to political and economic appointments. This can involve clan pacting, balancing, or monopoly and exclusion. The system of clan politics shapes choices about, or the implementation of, economic policy."

The two most important former Soviet Central Asian Republics are Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Kazakhstan is the largest of these Central Asia states in territorially size, more than twice as large as the other four combined.

Uzbekistan is the most populous country with a population nearly equal to the other four combined.

Kazakhstan has the largest and strongest economy of the five, accounting for 60 percent of the GDP of the region.

Uzbekistan maintains largest military in the region.

The politics of both reflects the distribution of power and influence of their respective tribes.

In Kazakhstan, there are three great tribes: the Great Horde in the south, the Middle Horde in

the center, and the Lesser Horde in the north. Historically, power and prestige reside with the Great Horde. President Nazarbayev comes from the Great Horde. His appointments of leading national and regional officials is influenced by, and his power and the stability of the state, rests upon "his ability to balance the clan system's various political factions."

In Uzbekistan, there are seven clans, those of Tashkent, Fergana, and Samarkand are viewed as the paramount clans. In 1983, with Moscow's backing, the Samarkand clan ousted the Fergana clan from power. Since independence, the Samarkand clan has retained power in Uzbekistan. The late President, Islam Karimov, was from that clan as is his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. This has led to strained relations with the rival Tashkent clan, including rumors the Tashkent clan had attempted a coup against the late President Karimov. In its clash with rival clans, and to win Western sympathy, if not support, the government of Uzbekistan has depicted these clans, not as clans, but Islamic extremists. The 2005 massacre in Andijan was officially presented by the government as police action against Islamic extremists, but is thought by some analysts to have its origin in these clan disputes. The West condemned the massacre, then went back to business as usual with President Karimov.

In Turkmenistan, there are five tribes. WikiLeaks' Global Intelligence Files report: "It is however within main clan, the Teke (representing about 80% of the population) that divisions seem the greatest. It is made up of three sub-clans: the Akhal, Mary and Kyzyl Arvat, which share the drug trafficking trade - estimated at 80 tons a year - and management of the revenues from the Dauletabad gas fields in the south east of the country." The late president, Saparmurat Niyazov, and the current president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, are from the Akhal clan as was the head of state security, Akmurad Redzhepov, who allegedly facilitated Berdimuhamedov's assumption to the power. Redzhepov, a potential rival to the new president, was subsequently arrested and imprisoned.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the "poor" Central Asian countries. According to UNDP, between one-quarter and one-third of the population in these countries lives in "extreme poverty". Over 90 percent of the territory of each country lies in the world's highest mountain ranges - the Tien Shan and Pamirs. These mountains physically fragment the countries preserving the power of the tribes and preventing the emergence of "nations".

Kyrgyzstan is divided into a north and a south. Each region home to rival tribes. "...the tribes can be generally divided between the Left Alliance, which consists of northern and western tribes, and the Right Alliance, which consists of southern tribes." As the "revolution" against President Akayev in 2005 and the "revolution" against President Bakiev in 2010 demonstrated politics in Kyrgyzstan is the quest for power between these rival tribal alliances. In "Recurring

Themes in the Kyrgyz Revolutions", Genevieve Gunow noted "Akayev, a northerner, was more popular in the north than in the south. Bakiev, a southerner, was able to use his popularity in the south to help overthrow the Akayev regime by relying on his southern supporters...The opposition movement in 2010, by contrast, was mainly supported by northerners who were unhappy with Bakiev's regime and control of the government by southerners."

Tajikistan is partitioned into north, south and center regions, homes to four regional based clans - Khodzhent, Kulyab, Harm, and Pamir. As I've previously written in the Indian Journal, " In the civil war in Tajikistan, 1992-1997, rival political factions were frequently identified by clan loyalties." The Kulyab clan waited 30 years to challenge the power of the Soviet installed Khodzhent clan. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent civil war, the Kulyab clan seized political power.

With clan and tribal identity so powerful, with the rivalry among clans and tribes so strong, with deserts and mountains providing defensible homelands to many of the clans and tribes, the West must be circumspect in its relations with the five former Soviet Central Asian Republics. Attempts to promote "regime change" or imposing economic sanctions on a government over charges of human rights violations, corruption or drug trafficking could promote political instability, unleash wars among clans and tribes, and lead to the unraveling of the state. The collapse of one state could lead to the collapse of the others.

Would the West want five "Libyas" in the heart of Eurasia?

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