

## February 1990 Riots in Tajikistan. Who Was Behind the Scenes? Review of the Main Existing Versions

*Les événements de 1990 à Douchanbé : qui était en coulisse ? Examen des  
principales versions*

*ФЕВРАЛЬСКИЕ СОБЫТИЯ 1990 ГОДА В ТАДЖИКИСТАНЕ: КТО СТОЯЛ ЗА  
КУЛИСАМИ? ОБЗОР ОСНОВНЫХ СУЩЕСТВУЮЩИХ ВЕРСИЙ*

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# **February 1990 Riots in Tajikistan Who Was Behind the Scenes? Review of the Main Existing Versions**

Parviz MULLOJANOV\*

## **Introduction: Political Situation on the Eve of the February 1990 Events**

The major political event at the end of the perestroika (1985-1991) in the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Tajikistan was the elections for the Supreme Soviet (Parliament) of the republic, scheduled for March 1990. In many senses, it was a turning point in the country's political life because, for the first time, the elections were supposed to have a relatively free character due to the weakened domination of the ruling Communist Party (CP). It is worth noting that by the end of perestroika, the republic was in deep economic crisis, which considerably raised the level of social tension. The call for elections gave reasonable hope to the leaders of the opposition movement Rastokhez<sup>1</sup> and its supporters of entering the Supreme Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> Rastokhez [revival in Tajik] was a political organisation in Tajikistan in the years of perestroika and civil war (1989-1997) with a programme of moderate national revival and democratic liberalism.

as a separate and influential oppositional faction. The previous year was considered as one of the most successful for the movement. The democrats considerably expanded their network in the regions, conducted their convening conference and established steady contacts and cooperation with similar national-democratic movements and parties of other Soviet republics. The enthusiastic Rastokhez leaders were counting on a minimum of 20-30% of seats and, by autumn 1989, placed their popularisation and organisational activities on a much broader footing.<sup>2</sup> At the end of December 1989, with the aim of enhancing its activities and ensuring fair elections, Rastokhez made an official application to the government to conduct a large-scale pre-election meeting on February 18, 1990.

At the same time, and since the beginning of January 1990, the capital faced increasing rumours concerning the alleged arrival in Dushanbe of thousands of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan (Kališevskij, 2010). All refugees were presumably provided with housing at the expense of local families on the municipal waiting list. There were also rumours that in Leninakan, in the Armenian SSR, local people burned and trampled Tajik national clothes that had been collected and delivered to the earthquake victims as humanitarian aid.<sup>3</sup> The rumours spread via different channels, youth meetings in city-blocks, telephone calls to mosques, propaganda during prayers, and leaflets in local universities. For instance, a poster was fixed on the entrance door to the Pedagogical Institute students' cafeteria. As was later revealed by official investigations, the information about the refugees was disseminated during preaching in several mosques. The date of the future anti-refugee meeting was also openly disseminated to the public from the end of January. There were calls and advertisements to participate in a protest meeting to be held on February 11, 1990 in front of the Central Committee building (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 180).

The rumours caused rising concern and a flow of warnings and requests to official bodies from both ordinary citizens and public associations. Thus, several days before the events, the Rastokhez leadership had an internal meeting to discuss these rumours. As a result, on February 9, a warning

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mirbobo Mirrakhimov, one of the founders and a prominent leader of Rastokhez, June 23, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The Spitak earthquake (also called Leninakan earthquake and Gyumri earthquake) occurred in the Northern region of the RSS of Armenia on December 7, 1988. Humanitarian aid items were collected and sent to the earthquake victims from all republics of the USSR.

letter was drafted and sent by Rastokhez to the government with a request to inform the population as soon as possible about the real situation with the refugees in order to prevent potential disturbances. At about the same time, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan<sup>4</sup> decided not to participate in the upcoming public meeting, with a fear that the rumours were a “KGB trap.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, although several imams were sympathetic to Rastokhez and participated both in propaganda meetings and activities, the majority of its leaders did not take part in the demonstration. In his statement made several months after the February events, the Prosecutor of the Tajik SSR Gennadij Mikhailin asserted that, on February 9, a group of criminal leaders gathered in one of the city cafeterias to plan the organisation of large-scale disturbances, allegedly joined by some top-level officials (*ibid.*, p. 204). However, neither the government, nor the law enforcement bodies undertook any preventive measures and the rumours continued until the last day.

### The Sequence of February 1990 Events

Although the official date of the beginning of the February events is February 11, the first groups of protestors attempted to organise a meeting on February, 10 but failed to attract more than a hundred people (Anonymous, 2014). On February 11 at approximately 11:30am, a crowd gathered in front of the Council of Ministers building in Lenin square and, soon after, moved to a square in front of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT), on the crossroads of Lenin avenue and Putovskij street. The crowd was initially small and did not exceed 200 people. However, the demonstrators soon blocked the road and stopped traffic and the square started to fill up with passers-by and curious onlookers. According to various estimations, by the afternoon the number of demonstrators had increased to up to 2,000 people, since many students from the nearby Pedagogical Institute walked through the square after classes and joined the public meeting (Kališevskij, 2010).

The demonstrators demanded clarification of the rumours that Armenian refugees would be provided with housing from the waiting list at the

<sup>4</sup> The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT or *Hizbi Nahzati Islomii Tođžikiston* in Tajik) was a branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party of the Soviet Union, founded in 1990 in Moscow, and therefore under strict KGB surveillance and control. It separated and became an independent political party in 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with an IRPT Deputy Chairman at the time of the riots, September 9, 2012.

expense of local families. Turadžonzoda, the head of *Kaziât* – the official spiritual administration of Tajikistan's Muslims – managed to calm the meeting participants down. They finally left the square at approximately 2pm on the condition that the authorities would provide complete answers to all their questions within the next 24 hours. On the same day, Moscow sent several military units to Dushanbe: 790 fighters of the “Alfa” special force unit and 1,068 troops, mostly paratroopers. They joined local forces, including militia units and troops of the Dushanbe garrison and the 201-Motor Rifle Division stationed permanently in Tajikistan (Davlatov & Mamadšoev, 2012).

On February 12, the public meeting restarted at 3pm. The crowd soon filled not only the square but also nearby streets, bringing the number of active demonstrators to 5,000. The first clashes between protesters and security forces soon occurred. Troops started to use teargas, several grenades exploded in front of the *Sport* shop located nearby. The crowd was dispersed but soon returned to the square and clashes continued (*idem*). By approximately 3:30pm, troops opened fire. According to witnesses, one of the first victims was Nikita Matrosov, a reporter from Moscow who was taking pictures from the third floor of a building located in front of the CPT Central Committee. At the same time, a local resident was shot in her kitchen located on the second floor of the same building. According to the police investigation, they were both killed by shots fired from the roof of the CPT Central Committee (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 204).

Soon after, Tajikistan's officials tried to appeal to the crowd. Otakhon Latifi, deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, made a speech which was not welcomed. At 4pm, CPT First Secretary Kahhor Mahkamov, appeared at the square for the first time and tried to give a speech. Demonstrators were already outraged and somebody from the crowd threw a galosh and then a stone at his face. Mahkamov was forced to interrupt his speech and retreat with his bodyguards inside the building. Almost immediately thereafter, shooting resumed, causing at least six deaths and about seventy injured. In response, the crowd dispersed from the square to Lenin and Putovskij streets, shouting for weapons and revenge. Moving down the streets, protesters started to attack Russian passers-by and local women dressed like Europeans, loot shops, and burn vehicles. During the evening at least twenty-two shops, twenty-two restaurants and cafes, two

cinemas, two banks, three militia vehicles, three ambulances, two trucks, and one trolleybus were reportedly destroyed or looted. As a result, at 6pm the government declared a state of emergency in the capital (*idem*).

Later in the evening, Mahkamov delivered a speech on republican television. He appealed to the population of Dushanbe to organise self-defence units all over the city in order to save property and lives and counter the action of looters. His speech gave the population of Dushanbe the official green light to organise their own protection, covering all districts and city-blocks of the capital. The self-defence units were organised on a territorial basis and included representatives of all ethnic groups. Each block was guarded by locals armed with sticks, reinforced steel, axes and other improvised arms.

On February 13, the demonstration started at 10am and was soon dispersed by the army and the police. A crowd of 20,000 to 30,000 people gathered again at 1:30pm. This time, their slogans were exclusively political and anti-governmental. The protesters demanded that the government resign, that officials responsible for the use of arms against them be punished, that the sixty detainees arrested earlier by police be released, and that funerals be organised for those killed. At the same time, Džamšed Karimov, First Secretary of the Dushanbe City CPT Executive Committee and a group of his subordinates attempted to walk up to the square. The officials got as far as the Russian Drama Theatre Mayakovski, located one block away from the square, when shooting began and the crowd dispersed. The officials were forced to leave as well, actually taking the lead in running from the shooting.

At 6.45pm, the crowd began to organise itself again. Leadership was finally taken by a group of the most active protesters. Among them there were several well-known figures, civic leaders and ordinary citizens. They formed a "Committee of 17," later officially renamed *Vakhdat* [Unity], intended to convey the demonstrators' demands to the republic's leaders. Buri Karimov, Minister of Construction and Transport, and deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, was designated to lead the "Committee of 17." Paradoxically thus, the demonstrators selected a top level official to be their representative in negotiations with the government. Afterwards Karimov insisted that he was asked and convinced personally by the CPT First Secretary Mahkamov to play the role of mediator and to

lead the Committee (Karimov, 1997). Indeed, Karimov was a well-known and popular figure of the Tajik SSR at that time. As the youngest minister in the country, he was seen as an innovator and for many demonstrators symbolised perestroika and a new generation of reformists in the ruling elite. In addition, he was originally from the Gharm region (Centre) and in public opinion was associated with internal opposition, challenging the domination of Northern Leninobod province in power structures.<sup>6</sup> The Committee drafted a “List of twenty demands” for the government. The main claim was the resignation of the three political leaders of the republic: CPT First Secretary Kakhhor Mahkamov, Supreme Soviet Chairman Goibnazar Pallaev, and Council of Ministers Chairman Izotullo Haëev.

In the morning of February 14, an urgent Plenum of the CPT Central Committee was held to discuss the current issue. Soon afterwards, talks between the “Committee of 17” and leading representatives of the republic started. The main subject of the negotiations was the resignation of the government. However, the three top level officials strongly objected to the accusations made against them and refused to resign. They were supported by Vladimir Petkel’, head of the Tajik KGB, whereas Boris Pugo, a top level Moscow representative, insisted on their resignation. His position turned the scales and within a few hours an agreement was reached and a Protocol signed to confirm the resignation of Mahkamov, Pallaev, and Haëev. It was also agreed that the following three days would be declared public and official mourning days during which time all public demonstrations and rallies would be prohibited (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 204). However despite these progress, by 8pm, the clashes continued. The army used firearms and several more protesters were killed and wounded.

Right after the conclusion of the meeting, the deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers Buri Karimov and the Minister of Culture Nur Tabarov decided to move forward and push for cadre changes. They also tried to convince several other members of the government to issue a Decree of the Council of Ministers calling for the resignation of Izotullo Haëev and the appointment of Buri Karimov in his place. However, they did not take into

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<sup>6</sup> During the last decades of the Soviet era, the power structures in Tajikistan were dominated by the descendants from Northern Leninobod province. This domination was increasingly opposed by internal political factions from the Southern mountainous regions including Gharm. The furious competition for power between various regional factions was one of the main distinguishing features of the perestroika period in Soviet Tajikistan.

account that in order to be validated, the Protocol of resignation had to be approved by the relevant official bodies: Mahkamov's resignation had to be confirmed by the Plenum of the CPT Central Committee, Haëev's by the Council of Ministers and Pallaev's by the Supreme Soviet (*idem*).

This internal intrigue caused additional turmoil within the government and the top level structures of the Communist Party. Several officials supported Buri Karimov, who allegedly insisted that his candidature had already been approved by the Moscow leadership, including Mikhail Gorbachev. Later, those officials who sought to hurry to implement the Moscow decision that evening were accused of anti-State plotting and were punished. The majority of officials finally decided to wait several more days. The ensuing course of events justified their cautiousness as, by the next day, the three leaders who signed the Protocol of resignation officially announced that it was invalid and continued to work until the CPT Plenum.

Such an abrupt change in leadership behaviour has always been a source of debate among observers, the majority believing that the three officials never intended to leave and the conclusion of the Protocol of resignation was just a tactical measure aimed at saving time. The recently published memoirs of Russian General Valerij Vorotnikov, head of the "Alfa" special force unit at the time of the events, have shed some light on the case. According to the General, Moscow gave its position concerning the resignation of the three leaders after the Protocol had been signed. Most probably the federal authorities initially approved of the resignation and even agreed on the appointment of Buri Karimov, which explains his self-confidence and persistent behaviour after the Protocol conclusion. It is suggested, however, that the Moscow leadership then changed its opinion by the end of the same day. This was also a sign that Moscow finally decided to adopt a hard-line and uncompromising policy of suppression towards the demonstrators (Mlečin, s.d.).

On February 15-17, a series of official meetings were organised during the mourning days, and on February 18, despite preventative measures, the demonstration restarted. From the morning, thousands of people started to gather again near the building of the CPT Central Committee. However, police detachments and army units blocked the road and the demonstrators were not allowed to move to the square. The crowd walked several kilometres down along Putovskij street until it reached the *Borbad* concert



hall. About 15,000 people occupied a construction foundation pit and hold a meeting. This time, speakers openly criticised the existing power sharing system and the domination of Leninobodis in administration. It was actually the first public, and rather radical, manifestation of inter-regional rivalry. One of the speakers stated: “Is it true that only women from Leninobod are able to give birth to First Secretaries [of the Tajik Communist Party]?” The statement immediately spread throughout the country, cited by a number of pro-government publications, dividing the North from the South and causing frustration on one side and excitement on the other. Many observers believe that this was the day that the democrats lost their support of the North. In addition, in Leninobod, rumours were spreading that “in Dushanbe the democrats are hunting Leninobodis on the streets and burning the vehicles with Leninobod plates” (Karimov, 1998).

The meeting continued for several hours but without clashes or shootings. The meeting then calmly broke up and demonstrators left the area. According to the meeting leaders, the protests could no longer continue for fear of causing major casualties. The overall situation was already completely under army and police control, and the number of security units had considerably increased due to an urgent airlift of additional detachments from outside of the republic. As a result, February 18 was to be the last day of the February events in Dushanbe.

### **The Aftermath of the February 1990 Events**

February 1990 is considered a turning point in the political, social and economic life of the republic. Prior to the events, Soviet Tajikistan was widely considered as an island of stability, a symbol of unchanging society left forever behind. The disturbances brought with them complete social transformation, political unpredictability, as well as abrupt and frequent changes of events. It was actually the beginning of a descent into a deepening crisis and ensuing civil confrontation.

The main political consequence of the events was a large-scale and irreversible discrediting of the Rastokhez movement in the eyes of a wide strata of the population. From the first mass media publications and coverage onwards, Rastokhez was directly and indirectly described as the main instigator of unrest. Already during the top-level official meetings held on February 14-18, extensively covered by mass media – both in the republic

and in Moscow –, the majority of speakers, officials and representatives of the law enforcement bodies openly accused Rastokhez of organising and leading the demonstrators. Even a part of the official Islamic clergy was mobilised by state propaganda. In mass media and during preaching, some members of the clergy publicly interpreted the word “*Rastokhez*” [revival] as “*Kiëmat*” [resurrection], stating that under this name the organisation would lead people to social and political apocalypse.<sup>7</sup>

It is little wonder that the impact of such large-scale propaganda, coupled with public shock and common frustration, was devastating for Tajik democrats, ruining the image and political prospects of the movement. Many local and foreign observers are surprised today by the rapid loss of public support for Rastokhez and its inability to withstand pressure and effectively deny at least the main part of accusations. However, it is necessary to take into account the degree to which the public in general was upset by the violent events, especially the attacks on innocent civilians on the streets, the looting and beatings. After several decades of stability and social calm, such deeds were perceived as particularly brutal. More importantly, and due to the Soviet media and state propaganda machine, the population started to affiliate the horror of the February events exclusively with Rastokhez. And many Rastokhez leaders and ordinary activists were equally stunned by the events as the image of outraged crowds on the streets was very different to their idealistic picture of protesting citizens. This shock and frustration, coupled with the increasing pressure from security agencies, considerably limited the organisation’s ability to conduct counter-propaganda.

As a result, Rastokhez was forced to considerably reduce its activities due to the overall atmosphere of suspicion. A number of its members abandoned positions as they were fearing state repression. Dozens of activists became subjects of official investigations, many being forced to resign or to move to another job. For example, Mahmadali Khait and Olim Zarobek, two well-known journalists from the republican television, were fired for a series of pro-oppositional reports.

In addition, the government decided not to suspend the state of emergency decreed in the capital on the second day of disturbances. This decision

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mahmadali Khait, journalist and member of Rastokhez, September 8, 2012.

was explained as a preventive measure aimed at averting any destabilisation during the forthcoming elections for the Supreme Soviet of the Tajik SSR. The government also used this ground to reject proposals to postpone the elections. They were held in March 1990 under the state of emergency and with a discredited opposition. It is not surprising therefore, that the new Supreme Soviet was overwhelmingly dominated by representatives of the Communist Party.<sup>8</sup>

The most negative impact of the February events was the emigration of the Russian-speaking population from Tajikistan to other parts of the USSR. Emigration had started long before the 1990's for purely economic reasons and concerned mostly young professionals from the scientific and engineering sectors. It temporarily increased after the adoption in 1989 of the "Law on the language",<sup>9</sup> but after the February events, the migration flow out of the republic amplified steadily.

### **Official Investigations of the February Events**

After the outbreak of disturbances, the state and law enforcement bodies publicly announced their plans to conduct a comprehensive investigation to identify the main causes and organisers of the events. In the meantime, even during the very first days, preliminary data and information was publicly disseminated at the Politburo Plenum and other political meetings and widely broadcasted on television. Many of the announced facts and data were later proved to be incorrect. For instance, the head of the Tajik KGB Vladimir Petkel' and the Prosecutor of the Tajik SSR Gennadij Mikhailin stated initially that the crowd "overturned a bread transportation vehicle and trampled the bread loaves" (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 180). The official investigation proved that the information on trampled bread loaves had been fabricated. Investigations went on to prove that information broadly disseminated in the central mass media concerning a "raped pregnant Russian woman" and "a child thrown into the river" was also

<sup>8</sup> 94% of the newly elected Supreme Soviet deputies were members of the Communist Party, of which 25% were former chairmen of Party committees (*partkoms*), 30% were heads of state enterprises and ministries, with only two workers, one farmer, two teachers and one scholar (Panfilov, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> The Law on the language adopted by the Supreme Soviet in July 1989 made Tajik an official language. The law was strongly opposed by the local Russian speaking population and intelligentsia.

untrue. It was also revealed that the law enforcement bodies artificially increased the amount of financial loss as well as the quantity and the cost of the goods lost from the destroyed shops (*idem*).

According to the ministry of Health of the Tajik SSR and investigation data on the events:

813 citizens applied for medical treatment: 56.5% of ethnic Russians and 43.5% of Central Asians. [...] 25 people were killed: 21 were shot, 2 were stabbed with a knife and in 2 cases the reason of death is not given. In terms of ethnicity of the 25 dead people: 16 Tajiks, 5 Russians, 2 Uzbeks, 1 Tatar and 1 Azeri (*ibid.*, pp. 196-198).

Investigation commissions and journalists agree that the February events were not spontaneous, but a well-planned and thoroughly organised action. However, not one of the official investigations could clearly answer the most important questions: what forces were behind the events? who organised the disturbances? how, and for what reasons?

Several official commissions were set up to address these questions. Firstly, the KGB investigation team started working during the events. Its report was presented to the authorities, both in Moscow and Dushanbe. As they were never disseminated in public, only a few aspects have been revealed. The KGB investigators initially accused Rastokhez but later blamed a group of unofficial clergy and several top level officials. The Prosecutor of the Tajik SSR conducted its own investigation, the preliminary results of which were presented to the Supreme Soviet in December 1990, after almost a year of inquiries. The report actually only presents the activities and critiques of the Tajik democrats and unofficial clergy.

The third commission was organised right after the events by the Presidium of the Tajik Supreme Soviet. It included twelve deputies, representing all ethnic groups of the republic. Its investigation started late due to the unwillingness of law enforcement bodies, especially the Tajik Prosecutor Office and the KGB, to cooperate and respond to the commissions' inquiries. Within a few months, the commission produced a final report, which was not published inside the republic. Without providing any information on who was behind the events, the commission concluded that neither the Rastokhez movement, nor several top level officials pointed out of anti-government plotting by the KGB were actually involved in the organisation of the February events (Karimov, 1997).

Due to the limited success of the three republican commissions, the central authorities decided to undertake a new investigation under the direct control of the General Prosecutor in Moscow. Initiated by Oleg Litvak, it was continued and completed by Solidžon Džuraev, both being Senior Investigators of the General Prosecutor Office. They headed a joint investigation team consisting of a hundred professionals from local law enforcement bodies, militia, KGB and the Prosecutor Office of the Tajik SSR (Davlatov & Mamadšoev, 2012). The report was submitted to the General Prosecutor and to the CP Central Committee. Only recently, Džuraev has revealed some of the major conclusions of the investigation team in several public interviews. According to him, there were evidences of the central KGB office involvement in organising events, falsifying investigation data and putting pressure on the other investigation teams (*idem*).

In addition to these official investigations, it should be noted that several journalists have inquired and published about the February events, reflecting different positions and opinions. However, none of the prominent figures mentioned in the investigation reports and publications was prosecuted.

### **An Analysis of the Main Versions and Possible Scenarios**

A thorough analysis of the existing public and official investigations, publications and memoirs devoted to the February Events highlights the following four main versions of who was behind the scenes:

#### *Version 1: Rastokhez and National Democrat Leaders*

This was the official version developed and promoted by the law enforcement agencies, primarily the KGB and the Tajik Prosecutor Gennadij Mikhailin. According to him, the main signs were the active presence of Rastokhez prominent leaders during the events, and the fact that 8 out of 14 members of *Vakhdat* (the committee created by demonstrators) were representatives of Rastokhez. In addition, ordinary members of Rastokhez are alleged of spreading rumours about the refugees and calling for participation in the protests (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 240).

However, since the beginning there were a number of reliable arguments against this version, which made it untenable. Firstly, none of the investiga-

tion teams could find evidence of Rastokhez involvement in the organisation of the unrest to serve as a basis for legal prosecution. In his final statement to the Supreme Soviet, Mikhailin used a vague wording, as follows:

The leaders of Rastokhez and unofficial clergy are the organisers of conditions which led to the destabilisation of the socio-political situation, rise of tensions in inter-ethnic relations and finally all this together with other reasons led to the mass disturbances (*idem*).

Secondly, the version did not take into account the affinity between Tajik and Armenian democratic organisations. In 1988-1990, during the conflict that opposed Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Tajik national democrats predominantly sympathised with the Armenian side, mostly due to their shared anti-Pan-Turkism ideology. Rastokhez representatives used to back Armenian delegations in all gatherings and conferences organised in the USSR. In January 1989, at a joint conference held in Vilnius under the guidance of the Lithuanian *Sąjūdis* Reform Movement, the Tajik and Armenian delegations agreed to support each other's positions in the future. The friendly relation continued even after the February events. For instance, representatives of Armenian organisations supported Mirbobob Mirrahimov, a founder member of Rastokhez, in the publication in 1991 of the report of the Supreme Soviet investigation commission. Two former members of the Armenian diaspora in Tajikistan guarded Mirrahimov and the editor of the Sogdiana newspaper Parviz Mullojanov on their way to the *Sąjūdis* printing house in Vilnius. On February 12, 1990, Armenian representatives of several nationalist organisations arrived in Dushanbe to assist in evacuating local Armenians and investigating on the anti-Armenian disturbances. Although security agencies persistently pointed to Mirrahimov and several other leading figures of the Tajik opposition, the Armenian group came to the conclusion that neither Tajik democrats nor Islamists were responsible for the events.<sup>10</sup>

According to Rastokhez leaders, their decision to participate in the February demonstrations was made with the hope of shifting the crowds' attention from the Armenian refugees to the Tajik authorities. They managed to achieve this on February 12, when the most prominent democratic activists joined the rally. Slogans immediately assumed an openly anti-

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, Moscow, July 1993.

government character and the issue of Armenian refugees was silenced.<sup>11</sup> In addition, it should be recalled that, since December 1989, Rastokhez was preparing a large meeting scheduled for February 18, to which the national democrats attached special importance. With this in mind, what reason would they have to destabilise the situation in the capital just several days before their own large-scale action? And with regards to the upcoming elections, what was the reason for democrats to threaten the electoral process when their success seemed certain?

### *Version 2: Tajik Islamists*

This is actually a flip-side of the previous version developed by the KGB and the Tajik Prosecutor and was pushed forward when the first version failed (Ûsufi, 2011). In his above mentioned report, Mikhailin named several clergymen, mostly *Imam-Khatibs* (mosque leaders) from Dushanbe and the nearby Lenin district, some of whom were later prosecuted. A leading members of the Tajik opposition made the following main arguments against this version:

First, it is widely accepted that all of the significant mosques, especially those located in the capital, had been under close surveillance of both official structures and the KGB. More or less all important clergymen were also being closely monitored. The question is how could the KGB and other related agencies overlook such large scale preparations supposedly ongoing in the controlled mosques during the course of almost one month and a half? And if they did not overlook them, then why were the events not prevented?<sup>12</sup>

The same argument applies to political Islam, represented by the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Since their first arrests in 1986, all Islamist activists were closely monitored, every step observed. A former prominent official employee stipulated that IRPT leader Said Abdullo Nuri even requested the removal of the cameras installed in his bedroom because “it contradicts Islamic moral norms.”<sup>13</sup> By 1990, all Tajik Islamists had emerged from the underground and were openly conducting their activities, making the surveillance process much easier. It is still not

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mirbobo Mirrakhimov, June 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Moscow, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with one of the former senior officials from the State Committee on Religion of the Tajik SSR, Dushanbe, October 1995.

clear, therefore, how the law enforcement agencies could miss the primary objectives of their surveillance targets in such favourable conditions.

In addition, the Tajik Islamists opposed participation in the meetings and publicly defined them as “the KGB trap.” Most leaders did not show up in the square and appealed to the crowd to go home. This probably explains why charges against the IRPT were never brought in public. All official reports limited their accusations to the names of clergy individuals or used the unclear term “unofficial clergy.”

### *Version 3: Top Level Officials*

The version suggests that the plotting group planned to overthrow CPT First Secretary Kahhor Mahkamov with the support of local criminal leaders and the opposition. It was presented at the Plenum of the CPT Central Committee on February 14 and it was repeated in later political meetings held on February 15-18. It stated that the conspirators included Izotullo Haëev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Buri Karimov, Minister of Construction and Transport, Nur Tabarov, Minister of Culture, Nurullo Khuvajduloev, head of the CPT Political Department, Mazkhabšo Mukhabbatšoev, editor-in-chief of *Kommunist Tadžikistana*, and several other high ranking officials. The Plenum decided to dismiss them from their positions and recommended that law enforcement agencies carry out a detailed investigation in order to determine whether the accused officials were guilty.<sup>14</sup>

Further investigations did not confirm the conclusions of the Plenum. The Supreme Soviet investigation commission stated that all of the above mentioned persons had no involvement in organising the unrest:

Buri Karimov and Nur Tabarov, after conclusion of the Protocol of resignation of the Party and government leadership, being unaware of the nuances of legislation and considering the Protocol to be valid, agreed with each other and decided to take advantage of the situation [...] but there is no evidence of their involvement in the preparation of the events (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 203).

The same conclusion was reached by the General Prosecutor joint investigation team. Many facts presented by law enforcement agencies, especially by the KGB, were not confirmed during the course of the inves-

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Usmon Davlat, IRPT Deputy Chair.



tigation. For instance, according to KGB information, Izotullo Haëev had a secret meeting on February 9 with Rauf Saliev and Âkub Salimov, two prominent criminal bosses. This accusation was based on the testimony of a waitress of the cafeteria where the meeting was taking place. However, when questioned by the investigators of the General Prosecutor Office, she confessed that she accepted to give a false testimony in return for permission to emigrate from the USSR (Davlatov & Mamadšoev, 2012).

The most contradictory and doubtful part of this version is the inclusion of Izotullo Haëev to the list of unrest organisers. Haëev was one of the three republic's leaders, along with Mahkamov and Pallaev, and was forced to resign following the demonstrators' demands. Does this mean that Haëev organised his own dismissal? Due to the discrepancies of this version, the General Prosecutor refused to imprison the conspirators and officially closed the case despite strong pressure from the KGB, which persistently insisted that the investigation results must fully comply with the Plenum decisions (*idem*).

#### *Version 4: the KGB Central Apparatus.*

The proponents of this version consider that the February events were organised with the aim of preventing the ascension of Rastokhez to the Supreme Soviet, where it could form a considerable parliamentary faction. It is assumed that the KGB's initial intention was to organise controlled disturbances of nationalistic, reprehensible and disgusting character, and blame Rastokhez for the organisation, thus discrediting the party on the eve of the elections. At the same time, it would provide security agencies with a legal reason to suppress the movement or at least reject its application for official registration. As one of the respondents stated:

The organisers' initial plan failed because demonstrators very soon moved away from the subject of refugees and rallied against the government. They were no longer in control of the demonstration which assumed a more political and anti-government character instead of the intended purely nationalistic one.<sup>15</sup>

This version is often regarded as another variant of the conspiracy theory. In light of the well-known distrust of such theories within academic

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a former Rastokhez leader, July 2013.

circles, it is not seriously accepted outside Tajikistan. Initially, it was not popular in Tajikistan either, but opinions have changed in the last decade, both in the public opinion and among the local expert and journalist community. The wider acceptance of this version could be considered as a public response to the unsoundness of official explanations.

On the other hand, public opinion may have been influenced by a series of data and information that has only recently been revealed. Consequently, local proponents of the “KGB involvement theory” can today rely on a much broader range of arguments than ever before. For instance, ‘the conspiracy theory’ was initially based only on the testimony of the Tajik KGB officer Abdullo Nazarov, who, in 1990, openly accused the security agencies of organising the events (Panfilov, 1992). But later, Solidžon Džuraev, head of the General Prosecutor joint investigation team, openly stated that his inquiry revealed the KGB’s direct engagement in the preparation of the events, as well as the large scale fabrication of data (Davlatov & Mamadšoev, 2012). Even former CPT First Secretary Kahhor Mahkamov admitted in one of his recent interviews that the February events were prepared and organised by the central structures of the KGB in cooperation with some officials (Anonymous, 2011a).

As early as 1991, the Supreme Soviet investigators blamed the KGB leadership for not allowing them to interview its employees. In addition, the KGB refused to disclose a range of documents, video recordings and a three-hour documentary on the February events. The commission also stated that the KGB overlooked a series of warnings about the upcoming events, as for instance the following case:

On January 25, 1990, one of the high-ranking members the CPT Central Committee informed A. Dadabaev, Secretary of the Central Committee, that a group of Azerbaijan’s emissaries had arrived in Dushanbe and was conducting anti-party propaganda. Dadabaev immediately passed this information on to the leaders of the Tajik KGB (Nazriev & Sattorov, 2002, p. 171).

The KGB leadership was therefore informed of the ongoing propaganda activities and unrest preparation two weeks ahead of the disturbances. And this warning could not be overlooked as, according to the Soviet administrative rules, any information passed on from the Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPT was considered priority and required immediate reaction (*idem*). Why were no preventive measures taken? Why none of

the Azerbaijan's group members were detained or even investigated by the Soviet KGB, either in Tajikistan or in Azerbaijan? For instance, it would not have been difficult to find their names and addresses from the airline registration lists.

The role of local criminal groups in the disturbances was also surprisingly ignored. According to both official and unofficial sources, the criminal group *Vodonasos*, led by Rauf Saliev and Âkub Salimov, played an important role in mobilising the city youth. Both criminal leaders and their group members remained in the square during the entire demonstration and, according to numerous witness testimonies, criminals were actually running the demonstration during the first two days (Davlat Nurali, 2013). After the events, Rauf Saliev was arrested and spent several months in detention in Russia but was soon released. The question is why all official sources and investigation teams disregarded the role of the criminals and concentrated only on the opposition?

Interestingly, none of the senior officials of the Tajik KGB were punished or even reprimanded for the February unrest. Quite the contrary, they successfully continued their careers, with awards and promotions.<sup>16</sup> Such an indulgent attitude does not correspond to the historically established image of the Soviet intelligence service, well-known for stern internal discipline, rigorous requirements and strict attitude towards its employees, where a minor mistake could cost a career if not a reprimand.

There are still a number of people in Tajikistan who oppose this version, mostly among representatives of the local Russian speaking population, the elder generations and dedicated communists. Unfortunately, their objections have a more ideological and emotional character than a rational one. Such a reaction is understandable since, for many ordinary citizens born in the Soviet Union, and especially Russians, it is almost impossible to accept the idea of the KGB involvement. This would mean that the KGB and the central authorities actually provoked anti-Russian disturbances,

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, the head of the Tajik KGB Vladimir Petkel' was promoted to the central KGB structures in Moscow, where he became a close cadre of USSR KGB head Vladimir Krúčkov. In August 1991, a day before the failed coup in Moscow, Petkel' visited Dushanbe to meet his successor Strojkin. During a parliamentary session, the deputies of the Tajik Supreme Soviet stated that Petkel' brought with him a secret plan aimed at supporting the Moscow coup and in case of success, the KGB would implement a plan of arresting 1,100 people (Salimi, 2012).

letting down intentionally the local Russian community for the sake of some top level political interests.

## **Conclusions**

It remains difficult to sustain which version is closer to reality as there is still insufficient reliable and confirmed information on the events. However, the existing data allows us to draw several conclusions.

Firstly, all investigation commissions established by official and civic institutions during and after the events have come to the same conclusion that the public disturbances in Dushanbe were not spontaneous, but well-planned, professional and thoroughly prepared actions. In this regard, the various investigation commissions highlighted the following evidences and facts to prove the organised character of the disturbances:

- Investigators pointed a well organised propaganda campaign, with a considerable amount of pre-prepared material, including leaflets and proclamations, widely distributed starting from January 20.
- There was a series of informal and formal gatherings in various public places and institutions, including official and unofficial mosques, universities and students' dormitories, where people were called on to participate in protests.
- There were informal gatherings of criminal leaders, from at least two main groups in Dushanbe, with a view to preparing disturbances.
- Special propaganda groups had been actively instigating demonstration during the four weeks prior to the events, including a group from Azerbaijan, which allegedly arrived in Dushanbe before the disturbances.
- The exact date of the demonstration was widely known to the public at least two weeks before the events, because of leaflet distribution.
- Demonstrators used stones, steel sticks (fittings) and other similar devices that had been delivered by trucks to Lenin square at the beginning of disturbances (Ánovskaâ, 2010). During the first day, the crowd fought against soldiers and policemen using special equipment such as steel loops (lassos), which need time and preparation to produce.

Secondly, none of the investigation teams could find evidence to prove the Democrats (Rastokhez) and Islamists' involvement in the organisation of the events. The version of an alleged internal coup was also said to be unfounded. In fact, all versions initially developed and promoted by the investigation teams led by the KGB and the Tajik Prosecutor had been discredited as early as the end of 1990.

With this in mind, the argument that the Soviet KGB was directly or indirectly responsible for the February events remains the only credible version. This version has generated increasing debates in Tajikistan, with new data and information being disclosed by investigators in the course of the last decade. Today, the proponents of this version argue as follows. Firstly, there are many evidences that the Tajik KGB was aware of the upcoming disturbances. According to the Supreme Soviet investigation commission, the KGB overlooked a series of applications and warnings. The propaganda actions taken against Armenian refugees took place mainly in state universities,<sup>17</sup> and official mosques, which were traditionally under the strict surveillance of the KGB. Considering that the network of KGB informants amounted to between 400,000 and 2.9 million people (Albats, 1995, p. 68), including cases of "socially dangerous elements," such as national and religious groups, the number of informants represented one in a hundred citizens (Makarevič, 2015, p. 42). Therefore, the KGB did not overlook the warnings and data on the upcoming disturbances but purposefully disregarded them for purely political concerns. Secondly, the proponents of this version give particular weight to the recently revealed conclusions of the General Prosecutor joint investigation team, which stated that none of the three versions promoted by the KGB were sustainable due to the lack of evidence and accused the Tajik KGB of large scale data fabrication. Despite unprecedented pressure from the KGB and Tajik law enforcement officials who persistently demanded the arrest of the opposition leadership and several top level officials, the results of the investigation were presented on October 10, 1990 directly to Mikhail Gorbachev and members of the Politburo (Davlat Nurali, 2013). Thirdly, neither the opposition nor a group of Tajikistan's officials had the capacity to mobilise such a varied

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<sup>17</sup> Each university had so called "first departments" answering directly to the KGB. Their task was to note the ideological mood among students and teachers. In addition, there was usually a group of retired KGB employees from the so called "acting reserve" affiliated to each university and with the same task.

public, unconnected and ranging from criminal groups to propagandists from Azerbaijan. According to them, Rastokhez and Islamists were not able to conduct such large scale preparatory activities without exposing themselves to the security and law enforcement agencies. Fourthly, there was an increasing number of indirect evidence, such as the fact that the top-level Tajik KGB officials were not reprimanded or the new statement of former CPT First Secretary Mahkamov, who stressed the key role of Soviet KGB in organising the disturbances.

The proponents of this version consider the February events in Dushanbe through the prism of more global changes and socio-political transformation of the Soviet Union prior to its collapse. Indeed, the Soviet KGB played a key role at that time as one of the main initiators of perestroika. In this regard, General Filipp Bobkov, former deputy Chairman of the KGB, stated: "Perestroika was designed not by Gorbachev but Andropov [Chairman of the KGB from 1967 to 1982]. Unfortunately, he did not have enough time to complete his grandiose plan." The initial intention was "to return to Lenin," to improve and modernise the socialist system (Bobkov, 1995, p. 363).

According to the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovskij, the KGB supported nationalist and liberal-democratic movements at the beginning of perestroika in an attempt to counterbalance and weaken the resistance of the most conservative circles of the Communist Party leadership. The KGB infiltrated opposition movements with a wide network of informants and so-called "agents of influence" with the aim of controlling them. As a result, a number of prominent national democratic leaders of the 1980s are today accused of being affiliated with the Soviet security services (Grečenevskij, 2008). Aâz Mutalibov, President of Azerbaijan in 1990-1992, recently stated: "Not a single organisation in the USSR, especially an informal one, could be established without direct KGB participation" (Rasulzade, 2013). However, according to Bukovskij, with the growth and radicalisation of national movements, the "agents of influence" faced a complicated dilemma, either leave the movements or become radicalised as well. Therefore, by the beginning of 1989, the Soviet KGB had actually lost control of the democratisation process, as well as the various nationalist and democratic groups, the majority of which assumed an open anti-Soviet and anti-communist ideology with enough public support to seriously challenge local authorities in several Soviet republics.

From 1988 on, the KGB completely revised its policy towards national democratic movements, considering them as a main threat to the stability and integrity of the USSR. This policy change is associated with the figure of its Chairman Vladimir Krûčkov, who announced a large-scale campaign against the democrats and nationalist groups immediately upon his appointment.<sup>18</sup> According to Boris Eltsin, ex-President of Russia, the KGB turned into the most backward political factor in the country, partly because General Krûčkov “had a professional disease – spy mania [...] he was consistently sending secret memos to Gorbachev with one line: ‘Democrats are preparing a coup’” (El’cin, 1994, p. 80). Appealing to the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR, General Krûčkov stated that the authorities no longer felt obliged to rely on political means alone, it would use force even at the risk of bloodshed. General Krûčkov added that “the KGB mission is to fight against those destructive forces that are eager to disintegrate the Soviet Union” (Strigin, s.d., p. 6). The task of fighting against the “destructive forces” was assigned to the Fifth Ideological Directorate of the KGB, which was renamed as the Third Directorate for “Defence of Constitutional Order”<sup>19</sup> in August 1989.

Therefore, the last phase of perestroika (1989-1991) was marked by a sharp confrontation between conservative pro-communist forces led by the KGB and oppositional nationalist and liberal organisations. This period started with a series of disorders throughout the Soviet Union: Baku in January 1989, Tbilisi in April 1989, Dushanbe in February 1990, Vilnius and Riga in January 1991. It ended in August 1991 with General Krûčkov’s unsuccessful coup, and was followed by the dissolution of the USSR. It was a period when the pro-Communists attempted to regain control over society and prevent the collapse of Soviet power in the national republics. In the beginning, public disturbances led to the imposition of a state of emergency and political retreat of the democratic movements in the republics. However, in Lithuania and Latvia this retreat was only temporary and, soon, the local pro-Soviet forces suffered ultimate political defeat.

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<sup>18</sup> General Krûčkov was appointed to the position of Chairman of the KGB in 1989. He was dismissed after leading the unsuccessful pro-communist coup in August 1991.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that three years later, during the Tajik civil war (1992-1997), the phrase “defence of constitutional order” was used as a primary official slogan of the pro-communist People’s Front, which fought against the United Tajik Opposition, an alliance of the Tajik Islamist and democrats.

In Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, the elections held in a state of emergency led to creation of national parliaments dominated by the Communists. In Georgia, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, the internal political struggle continued for several years, even after the collapse of the USSR, with violent conflicts, where Moscow consistently supported conservative pro-communist forces. There are several similarities between the public disorders that took place in 1988-1991. For instance, a group of agents of the KGB led by General Vorotnikov, first deputy head of the Fifth Directorate, were present in all these disturbances (Udmancev, 2004). And a same group of senior CP officials and special force officers was also actively engaged in all the violent events, including Boris Pugo, Chairman of the CP Control Commission and Minister of Interior of the USSR,<sup>20</sup> and Colonel Mikhail Golovatov, head of the “Alfa” special force unit.<sup>21</sup> The link between the KGB and public disturbances during the last phase of perestroika remains unclear and insufficiently explored.

Regarding the February events in Dushanbe, the actual degree of KGB involvement remains unanswered. Most evidence and data in favour of the “KGB direct engagement version” are of indirect character. Opening up official archives may shed light on this version but the Tajik KGB archives are reported to have been burned during the civil war (1992-1997). Hopefully over the years, new information and data about the February events will be disclosed and available for scholars and the wider public.

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<sup>20</sup> General Boris Pugo was the former Chairman of the KGB of Latvia, Minister of Interior in 1990-1991, and a leading member of the August 1991 coup. He committed suicide after the failed coup.

<sup>21</sup> Colonel Golovatov is still under a European arrest warrant issued by Lithuania for the crimes committed during the repression of Vilnius and Riga events in January 1991 (Anonymous, 2011b).



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## Abstract

The series of large-scale disturbances that took place in Dushanbe in February 1990 are considered today as one of the most violent public disorders of the last decade of the Soviet Union. According to official data, the riots were caused by the spread of rumours suggesting that several thousand Armenian refugees were provided with housing at the expense of local families. However, the disturbances almost immediately assumed an open anti-government and political character leading to street violence and clashes.

There has been little in-depth coverage of the February events. Despite a growing number of publications, there is still a rather vague understanding of the causes and internal and external driving forces. All investigation commissions and journalists have agreed that these events were not spontaneous but rather the result of a well-planned and thoroughly organised action. However, none of the official investigations have provided an answer to the most important question: what forces were behind the events? who organised the disturbances? how, and for what reasons? With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore and analyse the different interpretations of the February events.

**Keywords:** February events, social disturbances, KGB, Tajikistan.

## Résumé

*Les événements de 1990 à Douchanbé : qui était en coulisse? Examen des principales versions*

La série de troubles qui se sont déroulées à Douchanbé en février 1990 sont considérées aujourd’hui comme l’un des désordres publics les plus violents de la dernière décennie de l’Union soviétique. Selon les données officielles, les émeutes ont été causées par la propagation de rumeurs suggérant que plusieurs milliers de réfugiés arméniens avaient reçu des logements aux dépens des familles locales.

Mais les troubles ont presque immédiatement pris un caractère anti-gouvernemental et politique, menant à la violence et aux affrontements de rue.

Ces événements de février n'ont pas fait l'objet de recherches approfondies. Malgré un nombre croissant de publications récentes, il existe encore une compréhension assez vague de leurs causes internes et externes. Les commissions d'enquête et les journalistes sont d'accord sur le fait que ces événements n'étaient pas spontanés mais plutôt le résultat d'une action planifiée et bien organisée. Cependant, aucune des enquêtes officielles n'a fourni de réponse aux principales questions : quelles forces se cachaient derrière les événements? Qui a organisé les troubles? Comment, et pour quelles raisons? L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer et d'analyser les différentes interprétations des événements de février.

**Mots-clés:** événements de février, troubles sociaux, KGB, Tadjikistan

### **Аннотация**

*Февральские события 1990 года в Таджикистане: кто стоял за кулисами? Обзор основных существующих версий*

Серия масштабных столкновений и беспорядков, произошедших в Душанбе в феврале 1990 года, сегодня рассматривается в качестве одних из наиболее ожесточенных общественных выступлений в истории последнего десятилетия Советского Союза. Беспорядки были вызваны внезапно распространившимися слухами о якобы планируемом выделении квартир нескольким тысячам беженцев из Советской Армении за счет очередников из местного списка муниципального жилья. Однако, почти сразу же после своего начала, беспорядки неожиданно приняли ярко выраженный антиправительственный и политический характер, перейдя вскоре в уличное насилие и столкновения.

В то же время февральские события до сих пор остаются в значительной степени неисследованным социальным явлением. Несмотря на растущее количество различных публикаций, все еще остается немало неясностей и белых пятен в отношении корней и причин конфликта, внутренних и внешних факторов и движущих сил. Все созданные в последующем комиссии по расследованию февральских событий пришли к выводу, что беспорядки не носили спонтанный и стихийный характер, но являлись хорошо подготовленной и организованной акцией. Однако, все официальные комиссии по расследованию событий, так и не смогли ответить на самый ключевой и важный вопрос – какие именно силы стояли за февральскими событиями? кто и по каким причинам организовал беспорядки? Основная цель данной статьи заключается в детальном рассмотрении и анализе всех основных имеющихся на сегодняшний день версий относительно причин и движущих сил февральских беспорядков.

**Ключевые слова:** Февральские события, общественные беспорядки, КГБ, Таджикистан