Tajikistan’s elusive nation-building process under Rahmon Emomali’s autocratic regime

by Pablo Garcia

Master Thesis Russian and Eurasian Studies
2015-2016

Dr M. Frear
“Pluralism has led us to the civil war” (Rahmon, 1992)

1 In (Gaume, 1995).
Acknowledgements

I express my deep gratefulness to Dr. Matthew Frear. Throughout the thesis research Dr. Frear was always available, attentive and generous. His guidance and suggestions were particularly clear, helpful and encouraging.

I also heartedly thank Dr Irna Hofman, a very kind, enthusiastic researcher, very supportive of my thesis subject.

Finally, I thank my parents, my brother, and dear friends who always encouraged me in this academic task.
# Table of contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 3

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 5
A) IMPACT OF SOVIET UNION IMPLOSION ON CENTRAL ASIA 5
B) TAJIKISTAN’S DISTINCTIVENESS AND RESEARCH QUESTION’S PERTINENCE 6
C) LITERATURE REVIEW 8
D) METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS 11
   METHODOLOGY 11
   LIMITATIONS 13
E) CHAPTER REVIEW 13

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 15
A) POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE AND NATION BUILDING 15
B) NATION AND STATE CONCEPTS AS VIEWED BY PRIMORDIALISTS AND MODERNISTS 17
C) ETHNOSYMBOLISM, NATIONALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY 20

CHAPTER 3: RAHMON’S NATIONAL IDENTITY NARRATIVES 22
A) THE UNEARTHING OF ‘TAJIK’ ROOTS: THE SAMANIDS, ZOROASTRIANISM AND ARYANISM 23
B) WATER AS A MODERN NATIONAL IDENTITY NARRATIVE: ROGUN DAM 29
C) THE PLACE OF ISLAM UNDER RAHMON’S REGIME 35

CHAPTER 4: AUTOCRACY CONSOLIDATED: RAHMON, THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL SYMBOL 41
A) THE ROLE OF STATE’S STRUCTURES IN THE MAKING OF RAHMON AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL 41
B) REFERENDUM ON AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION, AND THE LAW OF THE LEADER 46
C) ‘GREAT DISTRACTIONS’, PERFORMATIVE LEGITIMACY EXERCISES 50

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION 57

BIBLIOGRAPHY 59
“Rahmonov is a dictator, and one of the perks of the job is that you can redefine the past as you please and few will dare to disagree with you.” (Kalder, 2009).

“To what extent have all these nationalizing efforts by political elites over the last 25 years succeeded in establishing a “common-sense of belonging” that would not be eroded or lead to violence and chaos by any further transitions or efforts of political reform?” (Isaacs and Polese, 379).

Chapter 1: Introduction

a) Impact of Soviet Union implosion on Central Asia

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant a reconfiguration of Russia’s links and relations with its former republics. The implosion rendered evident asymmetries and structural inequalities in what was the USSR. An unintended consequence of the implosion was the sudden independence of Central Asian countries. Prior to 1991 there had been no signs of any emancipatory movement of whatever ideological inclination during the long Russian presence. Several terms have been coined to refer to this situation, among which “‘reluctant’ independent states” (Isaacs and Polese, 2015, 372). All of a sudden, the new leaderships in charge embarked in nation building and national identity narratives and also in a quest for legitimacy. The new ruling elites had to rely on the structures of the state they had inherited to develop their own supporting elements. For as Matveeva asserts “legitimacy, rests on several pillars which form the cornerstones of state ideologies, but the significance of these ingredients and their application varies across the region” (2009, 1099), and across countries.

It can be considered that nation building has been a difficult endeavour, and in Tajikistan’s case it has been particularly complex and tortuous due to the very early civil war. The long Russian presence had weakened a sense of ethnie. This situation compounded by social strife put Tajikistan on the borderlines of collapsing (Heathershaw and Herzig, 2011, 5). Nonetheless, Rahmon Emomali, (from now
onwards referred to as Rahmon), in power since the end of 1992, has managed to gradually cement his grip on power.

Such are some of the broad contextual elements behind Rahmon’s nation and national identity narratives, and his own role as architect of what is an undisputable top-down endeavour leading to his enshrining as the symbol of national unity and values.

**b) Tajikistan’s distinctiveness and research question’s pertinence**

Central Asia has been and continues to be an area of academic analysis and research, markedly so since the fall of the Soviet Union. Economic, political, geostrategic and security considerations have been some of the areas of interests. Linked to that, the religious factor, namely Islam and the risk of Islamic fundamentalism, has also been a topic of keen attention. Soviet implosion led analysts to speculate on the political orientation that the newly independent countries would adopt.

From my perspective, Tajikistan is a paradoxical case: nearly a quarter of century after independence, indisputably autocratic, Tajikistan is still embarked in nation building and national identity construction. Politically and socioeconomically it has advanced little, and at one point it has even been on the brink of becoming a failed state (Buisson, 2007, 116) (McGlinchey, 2008, 4). The poorest of the five Central Asian countries, it has been the only one to have gone through a long civil war (1992-1997), a subtle and not so subtle recurring theme in president Rahmon’s, public speeches.

Incidentally, not many in-depth studies have centred exclusively on Tajikistan. Rather the country has been an object of comparison focusing principally on the region’s political path and on its economic situation. Studies on the threat of Islamic

---

2Heathershaw's and Herzig's book, The transformation of Tajikistan: The Sources of Statehood, (2011), and Bleuer's and Nourzhanov's book, Tajikistan: A political and social history, (2013) are the main publications which focused only on Tajikistan.
fundamentalism have also been undertaken (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2006). It seems evident that Tajikistan is not high in the international community’s agenda, both in political and economic terms, as more pressing conflict scenarios have emerged.

The thesis strives to contribute to the argumentative discourse that sees Tajikistan as a country evolving from a soft to a hard autocracy (Nourzhanov, 2014) (Epkenhans, 2015). It seeks to demonstrate that through its nation and national identity construction endeavours Rahmon is in the process of becoming a narrative of its own. In this regard, the thesis seeks to illustrate how, through the role played by the state’s structures, he purposefully pretends to embody national unity, values and symbols. To enhance legitimacy he engages in performative or great distractions politics.

Having said that, the main purpose of the thesis will be to show what are the main axes in Rahmon’s nation building narratives, and how has he consolidated his grip on power and reinforced his autocratic regime. The thesis seeks to answer the following research question: How have Tajikistan’s nation building narratives and state structures rendered Rahmon the symbol of national unity?

Perestroïka nourished political debate and, also, nascent and complex internal power struggles, with a political leadership far from being cohesive. In Rahmon’s words: “it is worth noting that the late 80s of the XX century saw the emergence of political forces that initiated the debates on nation-building issues [adding on the same topic that] however […] the themes of debate ultimately went far from being just an issue of nation-building and translated into the struggle for political power by some groups and forces.” (2012)³. Already in power, Rahmon “had to fight for his position in several serious challenges, mostly against his former allies.” (Epkenhans, 2016)⁴. Economic and political struggles accentuated social unrest resulting soon after independence in a protracted civil war.

---

⁴ Taken from Epkenhans’ mail, in which the author briefly presents Rahmon’s arrival and stay in power.
c) Literature review

Soviet implosion gave lieu to concerns as to how Central Asian countries would evolve, in social, economic and political terms. The Soviet Union had been “nation-makers” (Isaacs and Polese, 2015, 372)\(^5\) and now these nations that had not sought independence were confronted with the task of reinventing themselves, embarking on nation and national identity building. They have tried since to distant themselves from each other and from Russia (Fedorenko, *Central Asia From Ethnic to Civic Nationalism*, 2012). Central Asia, contrary to initial apprehension, did not undergo unmanageable social strife, except Tajikistan. In fact, civil war is a quasi permanent political reference in Rahmon’s discourses. After 25 years as an independent country, Tajikistan is still embarked on nation building and in its efforts to de-emphasized its Soviet linkages. On this matter, according to Fragner (2001), Van Schendel and Zürcher (2001)\(^6\) Tajikistan has not quite succeeded in breaking up with “Soviet habits” (Fragner, 2001,13). It was the Soviet Union that outlined Tajikistan on ethno-territorial principles. Once independent, leadership felt it had to trace back in time and space its origins: the concept and the idea nation became central.

For Smith, the *ethnie* is the precursor of the nation, and both have preserved their distinctive traits throughout time, the *longue durée*. *Ethnie* and nation possess identifiable features, myths, histories, culture, language and a sense of collective belonging (Guibernau, 2004) (Rezvani, 2013)\(^7\). For Buisson and Khusenova (in *La production identitaire dans le Tadjikistan post-conflit : état des lieux* (2011)) the concept of *ethnie* as a marker is a blurry: Central Asians, prior to independence, seemed to be more attached to local specificities (localism) rather than ethnic filiations. They did have a two-layered identity, and an underlying aim of Tajikistan’s

\(^5\) In Between “imagined” and “real” nation-building: Identities and nationhood in post-soviet central Asia (2015).


leadership has been to do away with this two-layered identity and anchor a real Tajik one.

Nourzhanov’s and Bleuer’s book, *Tajikistan, a Political and Social History* (2013), gives a country’s overview from antiquity to civil war. It sketches Central Asia as a nomadic and sedentary multi-ethnic crossroad. It outlines Soviet states’ structures implantation and the coexistence of modern government structures with traditional ones. It underscores locals’ satisfaction with their social and living conditions as a Soviet republic and alludes to their perception of Perestroïka as a determinant disruptive factor, leading to political confrontation and civil war. McGlinchey, in *Patronage, Islam, and the Rise of Localism in Central Asia* (2008), maintains that the long-lasting Soviet period is viewed by Tajiks as a harmonious one. The Russians, he says, “are sorely missed” (2). Laruelle and Peyrouse, in their book *Asie Centrale, la dérive autoritaire: cinq républiques entre héritage soviétique, dictature et Islam* (2006) portray the socio-economic and political development of Central Asian republics since their independence. They highlight the efforts by the governing elites to hold on power. Nation and national identity building are the tools to achieve this aim. They are among the first in pointing out an authoritarian drift. Both authors highlight that the new ruling elites have heavily relied on the structures they inherited form the colonial period.

The *Transformation of Tajikistan*, book coordinated by Heathershaw and Herzig (2011), gives a clear overview on statehood roots, Islam, national identity, and family structures. It tackles the question of security and Tajikistan’s place in the international community and it underlines the “resilience of Tajikistan” and statehood formation (6). Largely based on Weber’s definition of the modern state and state legitimacy, in the article *State-Building, Power-Building and Political Legitimacy: The Case of Post-Conflict Tajikistan* (2007), Buisson explores the reconstruction of state-power. He refers to the consequences of the civil war on central authority, weakened by warlordism, very much still active in Rahmon’s government, who from the outset tried to give prominence to the Kulob region. Regionalism and warlordism are treated in depth by Nourzhanov in *Saviours of the nation or robber barons? Warlord politics in Tajikistan* (2005). Nourzhanov’s article is highly useful to understand Tajikistan’s
economic and political internal power struggles, a most important explanatory factor of civil war.

Edited by M.Y. Omelicheva, *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions* (2014) is a highly analytical book, parts of which closely relate to the subject proper of this thesis. Omelicheva discusses, along with other contributors, the nature and the dynamics of nationalism. She refers to the ongoing debates on the legitimacy process and collective belonging narratives. Specifically Nourzhanov’s contribution *Nation-building and Islam in post-Soviet Tajikistan*, tackles Rahmon’s political manipulation of Islam as practiced in Tajikistan, and more so with his efforts to eliminate the only credible opposition it has faced, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Closely related with the role of Islam in a secular society and its place in politics, Epkenhans in *The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan: Episodes of Islamic Activism, Postconflict Accommodation, and Political Marginalization* (2015) provides a most solid and comprehensive context where Islamic involvement originates and how it evolves into a political force, genuinely committed to pluralism and separation between state and religion. Epkenhans portrays Rahmon’s grip on Islamic bureaucracies and how he subordinates them to the state, neutralizing their disruptive potential, marginalizing the IRPT and paving the way for solidly cementing Rahmon’s autocracy. In his contribution to Omelicheva’s book, Hanks tackles in *Identity Theft: Ethnosymbolism, Autochthonism, and Aryanism in Uzbek and Tajik National Narratives*, the concept of national identity in a comparative manner: Tajikistan and Uzbekistan through the lens of ethnosymbolism, autochthonism and Aryanism. Both countries’ leaderships contesting each other’s parameters and putting into question “historical legitimacy and ethnic superiority” (xxii). In the same vein, in *Statehood as dialogue: historical narratives of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan* (2013), Suyarkulova refers to “duelling identities”, inserting this competition in what she calls “historiography war” (162). It underlines the importance of statehood legitimacy as historians and politicians insist on demonstrating a link between “previous instances and the present” (173).

---

Still in the effort to distance itself from Uzbekistan and at the same time attempting to engrain a sense of national identity using an ancient and modern symbol which is water, Suyarkulova illustrates in *Between national idea and international conflict: the Roghun HHP as an anti colonial endeavor, body of the nation, and national wealth*, (2014) the Tajik-Uzbek dispute on nation and identity building through the Rogun dam. She suggests that the dam may well become the metaphor of the state and a contributor to Rahmon’s legitimacy. In *Building a nation through a dam: the case of Rogun in Tajikistan* (2015), Menga asserts that it has became an “ideology” of its own and another national identity marker. Both scholars point out the internal and external functions of Rogun. At another level Cariou, in *L’eau en Asie Centrale: Enjeux et défis contemporains* (2015) underscores Rogun’s symbolic dimension and the cult it may generate. Recognized the dam’s potential benefits and seen as a narrative in its own right and as a symbol of modern Tajikistan, Rogun is also a grandiose performative project. On her part, Matveeva underscores the legitimacy function of those performative policies (in *Legitimising central Asian authoritarianism: Political manipulation and symbolic power*, 2009). These performative distractions are always top-down initiatives. Isaacs and Polese highlight that nation building is always undertaken by “elites” (2015).

The literature consulted focuses largely on nation and nation identity building and related issues and, to a lesser degree, on specific topics such as historical roots, water, the role of Islam. Yet not in-depth studies on current political leadership, Rahmon in particular, have been produced, or on Rahmon as the uncontested national unity symbol. The aim of the thesis is to contribute to and spark a debate on Rahmon’s undisputed autocratic leadership.

**d) Methodology and Research Limitations**

**Methodology**

The thesis will be anchored in an inductive theory, centred on three premises formulated herein, with a view to identify the constituent pillars upon which Rahmon’s has articulated an idea of nation and of common identity. Related to that, it will illustrate the thematic linkages between the various narratives. To this end and so as
to tackle the research question, it will seek to demonstrate that through his nation building and national identity endeavours, Rahmon is in the process of becoming a narrative of its own. The thesis will strive to prove how, through the role played by the state’s structures, he has become the embodiment of national unity, values and symbols.

Two main historical markers permeate the thesis: the Soviet Union implosion and to a large degree the civil war. This is largely the context in which this thesis is set. As nation building is an as yet unfinished task, the narratives contain Rahmon’s references as late as 2016. The narratives are anchored on two main pillars: the idea of nation and common identity, concepts that are at the heart of major theories on nation building.

**Main concepts:** ethnie, nation, nation building, national identity, ethnosymbolism, state, nation-state.

**Main indicators:** Myths, ethnic roots, national boundaries, societal values, religion, political consciousness, cultural cohesiveness, colonialism, civil war, autocracy,

**Sources:** official speeches, state news agencies, official publications, and interviews.

As the thesis makes clear that from the outset, nation identity narratives have been a top-down task, the following premises are framed in that logic.

**Main premises:**

1. Tajikistan’s viability has rested on Rahmon’s ability to affirm his power and weave national identity narratives, and a sense of common belonging;

2. Narratives had to be anchored in distinct ancient roots to insert Tajikistan in modernity and to distance Tajikistan from its Soviet past and from civil strife.

3. In Tajikistan’s autocratic regime state structures made possible Rahmon’s enshrinement as the symbol of national unity.
Argumentative and support materials are drawn from Rahmon’s speeches, statements, media articles and newscasts. They were taken from the presidential website: www.president.tj, state media agencies: www.khovar.tj and www.avesta.tj. They deal mostly with speeches to Parliament, Independence Day, National Unity Day, New Year’s, Mother’s Day, and religious celebrations such as Navruz (Persian Spring and New Year). Quotations in the thesis were taken verbatim from the English texts published in the official channels referred above. I translated from Russian those materials only available in that language. Secondary sources refer to academic articles, books and journals, and articles from Central Asian and European newspapers. International organizations as well as NGOs’ (WB, RSF) underlined various angles concerning Tajikistan’s economic and socio-political development.

Limitations
During the last few years Tajikistan has become a more hermetic country. As a result academic and journalistic publications are scarce and field access to researches is increasingly difficult. It must be underlined the increased difficulty of local journalist and researchers to freely exert their professions. Rahmon’s uncontested tight grip on power impacts freedom of expression and, therefore, research work and the production of alternative analysis. Unsurprisingly then the access to Tajik media is more difficult as several websites have been shut down, and media venues such as Ozodagon and Nigoh are very difficult to access. Knowledge of Tajik language could have been helpful to grasp Rahmon’s vision of his nation, as presumably reflected in Tajikistan in the mirror of history (2001).

e) Chapter Review

The thesis is organised into three main chapters and a brief conclusion wrapping up its subject proper.

Chapter 2 sets the theoretical framework. As Rahmon has made every effort to underline and demonstrate Tajikistan’s presumed uniqueness, this chapter outlines the features of the nation, and the role symbols and values, as articulated by the main currents of thought on these matters: primordialism and modernism.
Throughout his stay in power Rahmon has invested himself in instilling in Tajiks an idea of nation and of common belonging, a complex task particularly when Tajikistan, nation and state, was ‘invented’ by external actors. In this case, the research of ethnic markers identified as national symbols are central to the nation building process.

Chapter 3 contextualises Rahmon’s main nation and national identity building narratives; a first section deals with the revival of Persian and Aryan roots; a second one, Rogun dam, which is both ancient and modern, aims at detonating and enhancing Tajikistan’s weight and presence in the region; a third section pertains to the place of Islam in an officially secular society, underlining Rahmon’s efforts to neutralise Islamic influence and marginalise political opposition. Through these sections, the chapter aims at illustrating Rahmon’s gradual autocratic consolidation, thematic performative policies playing a key role.

Chapter 4 illustrates how Rahmon’s narratives become a platform that projects him as the Leader that brought peace to the nation, and the one that set the foundation of modern Tajikistan. It seeks to demonstrate how through the role of state apparatuses, and the support of key public figures, he has been enshrined as the hero and symbol of national unity and values, for many the Father of the Nation.

Finally, the last section presents brief concluding remarks as related to the thesis’ premises and to the research question. It suggests areas for further academic research.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

As the thesis’s underlying argument revolves around Tajikistan’s nation and national identity construction, understood here as an ongoing process, this chapter sketches first the context in which the concepts of nation and state were conceived and applied under the Soviet regime, that is the Soviets as nation makers. It also briefly outlines how nation building was to be undertaken by the new ruling elites; it is then centred on what are considered the two major currents of thought on these subject matters: primordialism and modernism. It will subsequently centre on a key element for primordialists and modernists, ethnosymbolism, fundamental in national identity construction. This theoretical approach centres on the role presumably played by symbols, values and perceptions in the individual's imaginary on the nation (Omelicheva, 2014) (Hanks, 2014). Although largely differing in their assumptions, argumentations and conclusions, for primordialists and modernists alike, symbols and values perform key functions in nation building.

a) Political independence and nation building

It is worth underlining that Central Asia countries were the very last in ‘declaring’ independence from what until then had been the Soviet Union. Quoting Olscotts, Nourzhanov, among others, talks of a “freedom more forced on [Central Asian countries] than acquired or won” (2005, 111). Those countries reflect most unusual realities: independence was granted by the former colonial power, the very one that had designed their territories and assigned what ethnie would be the titular nation and what would be the national language, the one that had created the state structures (Omelicheva, 2014) (Rezvani, 2013) (Buisson and Khusenova, 2011). In this connection, van Schendel and Zürcher highlight that “Middle East and Central Asia offer the most striking early twentieth century examples of how political structures were created first and a national consciousness underpinning these new political units was constructed afterwards” (2001, 1). Indeed various researchers see Central Asian post-Soviet nationalism as a continuation, as a footprint of Soviet national delimitation policy (Fragner, 2001, 13-14) (Omelicheva, 2014, xiv). Allouche maintains that “this process of nation building initiated by the soviets changed the
map of the region by transforming former amorphous ethnic groups into distinct titular nations with identifiable eponymous territories.” (2005, 190).

Central Asian countries suddenly became politically independent without a prior deep cultural and national identity consciousness, and without a significant awareness of major historical national figures. The unearthing of important historical actors has been undertaken by the ruling elites, thus rendering nation building and national identity construction a top-down endeavour. In fact, as it has been mentioned, there is consensus that identity narratives invariably are imposed from above, with little saying and inputs from those in the receiving end (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2006) (Cummings, 2010). Basically this translates into imposed public policies and official discourse, with scant attention paid to the degree of acceptance or rejection by ordinary citizens, and non-state actors (Menga, 2015). Isaacs and Polese go as far as affirming that “nation-building can only be proposed by elites but [that this still would] need to be accepted (or renegotiated/rejected) by those who have a say in the construction of a national identity and who are an integrated aspect of the nation-building process” (2015, 372). This being said, it can also be argued that nation and national identity narratives have been targeted to a rather passive and captive nation-audience. In any event, even before the official accession to independence (09/09/1991), the main challenge was to retrieve and unearth from its ancient ancestry’s tree the constituent elements, building blocks, upon which to build and engrain in the ethnies a deep idea of nation and of national identity. This being said, it can also be argued that nation and national identity narratives have been targeted to a rather passive and captive audience.

From a different angle, it can be argued that national identity construction has also signified elite power building and specifically power consolidation of those at the reins of the state apparatuses. National identity narratives have become a most visible promotion platform for those at the helm and in charge of conducting the nation’s affairs. Indeed, from the available evidence, the power dynamics and the increasingly autocratic manner in which it is exercised seems to suggest that Rahmon, the indisputable Leader, is in the process of becoming part of the national identity narrative.
b) Nation and state concepts as viewed by primordialists and modernists

Central Asia’s political independence rendered evident how imprecise frontier setting and country design had been. The grandiose attempt by the Communist regime to create a Soviet nation and instil Soviet nationalism, left a profound imprint in the sudden new countries, and rendered their task particularly complex: disengagement from the ex-colonial power, and reinventing a national identity. Tajikistan’s case illustrates the relevance of concepts such as *ethnie*, nation, state, nation-state and nationalism. It also highlights the arguments advanced and debated by primordialism and modernism.

Nation and state, functionally interlinked, are two distinct conceptual instruments. They refer and deal with separate realities, each one with its own specificities and contextual borderlines. A persistent and enriching debate goes on regarding the main currents of thought on these subjects (Gibernau, 2004) (Rezvani, 2013) (Hanks, 2014) (Omelicheva, 2014). After the Soviet Union implosion, the new political configuration in Central Asia rendered evident the importance of those concepts. For instance, where does the nation find its roots? To what extent the state has succeeded or not in instilling and strengthening national identity?

For Rezvani, for instance, the nation, as a concept, is closely linked to the ethnic group. He views it as “a community whose members subjectively feel that they belong together” (2013, 36). A nation may be made-up of one or several ethnic groups. A state is a territorial entity, and is to be understood as “the political organization of a nation”, in other words the “state is the territorial manifestation of a nation” (2013, 36).

In what it relates to nationalism Rezvani defines it “as a process of ethnic groups becoming nations and, more so, a process of nations building a state” (2013, 41). Nationalism refers markedly to a sentiment or awareness of belonging. In what it relates to ongoing identity construction, Central Asian nationalisms are similar to those articulated by the “Soviet social engineers’ approach to building a nation-state“ (Omelicheva, 2014, xv). Upon independence, the new leaderships embarked on “the formation of new national identities” (ibid), as a way to gain legitimacy. In that sense
post Soviet ruling elites have actively implicated themselves in this process to enhance their grip on power. Towards this aim they “use the ideology of ethnic nationalism” (ibid).

In what it concerns the concept of state, drawing on Weber’s definition, for Guibernau, the state is “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (2004, 131). Whereas nation is to be understood as “a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself” (2004, 132). She maintains equally that there can be nations without states, not the opposite, and that the “nation-state is a modern institution, defined by the formation of a kind of state which has the monopoly of what it claims to be the legitimate use of force within a demarcated territory and seeks to unite the people subject to its rule by means of cultural homogenization” (2004, 132).

Among the variants on the definition of the modern state, Rezvani succinctly asserts that “a state is the political organization of a nation [and that] states are territorial entities”, which can only exercise their power within their boundaries (2013, 36). However Heathershaw points out that nowadays state’s boundaries are not confined to its formal given territory (2013, 43). External actors, such as international organizations, have a direct impact on the state. Buisson, on his part, maintains that the state is not a “neutral and integrative structure, but a source of conflict as well as a creation of power” (2007, 120).

Although aware of the various approaches, definitions and debate on ethnicity, nation and national identity, from my vantage point it is Anthony D. Smith’s definition of ethnies and nation that best apply to Tajikistan’s nation-building narratives. They highlight the logic of official discourse concerning the construction of Tajik national identity. According to Smith, ethnies are “human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity” (1986, 32)⁹. From that perspective, nationhood would be its

⁹ in (Guibernau, 2004, 126).
logical development, its expected corollary. Put another way, for all practical purposes *ethnies* would be the precursor of the nation, as there would be a line of continuity throughout time and space. For Smith, a nation is “a named community possessing an historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs” (2002, 15)\(^\text{10}\).

In the view of the primordialists, dimensions such as antiquity and ubiquity are essential in the making of a nation, a line of continuity and territoriality where individuals develop and nurture a shared sense of belonging, of identifiable markers (Hanks, 2014, 112). As Anderson puts it, a nation is an “imagined community”, apparently immaterial, subjective yet referring always also to a multidimensional reality where the people share the conviction and feeling of being part of the same group (Allouche, 2005, 104) (Heathershaw and Herzig, 2011, 10).

For modernists, on the other hand, nations are the product or outcome of the industrial revolution, of modernisation, the very emergence of mass means of communication. In their view, concepts such as culture and ethnicity are of lesser importance (Rezvani, 2013, 39) (Hanks, 2014, 112). Nations are a “social and cultural construct with limited spatial and demographic extent”, clearly identifiable traits in the Central Asian context (Menga, 2015, 479).

It seems reasonable to affirm that Smith’s definitions of *ethnie* and nation are clearly interlocked. They are useful for the understanding of how territoriality was determined and imposed upon ethnic groups by the Soviet power. Once independence was declared, it was precisely upon myths, ancestral roots, culture, shared memories and values that Central Asian states have anchored the nation building narratives.

This was necessary in at least two respects: on the one hand, the viability of the newly independent countries required a solid social support base. Tajikistan’s ruling elite has sought to instil in the population a conviction of its uniqueness, and of it ancient past, what Cummings has called “internally invented signs of national certainty” (2009, 1083). On the other hand, the very viability of the ruling elites has

\(^{10}\) in (Guibernau, 2004, 127)
depended on their success in nation building or if preferred nation make-believe. Legitimacy enhancement has been part of the national identity construction process.

c) Ethnosymbolism, nationalism and national identity

Ethnosymbolism is central for the understanding of nation building and national identity constructions. It assigns high relevance to myths, traditions, symbols and values. These are articulated, conveyed, shared and modified throughout time. Hanks (2014) suggests that ethnosymbolism does not necessarily negate the importance played by societal development, modernity for instance. On another angle of that vast topic, there is common agreement that national identity is multidimensional. It includes culture, language, territory and religion among other features.

For primordialists, a shared sense of belonging to a nation is inextricably linked to the array of ‘markers’ that a nation possesses. From this perspective symbols and values are at the root of ethnic or national identity. National identity construction is part of an ongoing process, part and parcel of a historical continuity. Viewed from this perspective, a central element in national identity is a keen sense of awareness on the part of an individual or a member of a group. In this vein, nationalism would be an expression of identification with the nation. The nation, in the primordialists’ view, does not emerge in a particular point in time, as sustained by modernists. It has matured and continues to evolve over the course of time, what has been termed the *longue durée*. Ethnosymbolism, according to Omelicheva, would be a connecting theoretical approach between primordialists and modernists. She maintains that ethnosymbolism “emphasizes the significance of symbols, traditions, values, and myths that go into the making and preservation of nations, while recognizing that national identity is shaped by the political and economic forces in which it develops” (Omelicheva, 2014, x).

National identity presumes the existence of sentiments of closeness, and of belonging to a nation. For Bölükbaşı, then, nationalism refers to a “broad symbol which entails values and goals that make it worthy of notice and acceptance.” (2001,
In this line of thinking and from my perspective, symbols and values, immaterial as they are, are conveyed and felt as being deeply connected with the notion of territoriality that contains the nation. People identify themselves as part of a given territory, symbolized by specific traditions, cultural attributes and bonded by what Jahangari calls “a sense of local pride” (1995, 35).

Along those lines, Omelicheva maintains that national territories awaken “a sentiment or consciousness of belonging to the nation.” (2014, ix). In this broad context, for primordialists, nationalism is closely linked to ideological construction and sentiments of social, cultural and political identification. It evolves from the nation, itself part and parcel of a historical constitutive process not circumscribed to a specific clear-cut historical moment or historical juncture. In contrast, for modernists nationalism emerges with the advent of modernity.

Symbols and myths provide an immaterial shelter. They have the capacity to influence and to instil in people a certainty or a sense of common belonging, and they considered the pillars of the nation. Thus symbols and myths must be unearthed by the political elites, to serve as a common historical basis that “would be accessible to the mass public” (Marat, 2008, 12). Heathershaw and Montgomery maintain that “myths are not incidental” (2014, 3). In fact, they are “a legitimating device for the militant secularism of weak regimes” (2014, 1). Not surprisingly then, myth magnification or even distortion has been a feature in national identity narratives. Indeed they may contribute to enhance the leadership’s legitimacy.

Ruling elites engage therefore in projecting an always glorious past, national traits and attributes, anything that can contribute to forge a sense of historical and territorial belonging. From this perspective nation and identity building has meant the construction of connecting venues between their new political realities and a singular, distinct common past. To gain in effectiveness nation building narratives included also the recuperation of language, as the most important glueing element. In the process, it has allowed the new independent countries to formally disengage themselves from their recent past, at a linguistic level. Tajikistan declared Tajik the official national language.
Chapter 3: Rahmon’s national identity narratives

As far back as the Tsarist period the notion of national identity was an elusive one. Kucera points out that such a notion was inexistent: “when Russian Orientalist scholars arrived in the region […] after Central Asia’s conquest by the tsarist empire, they were confounded by the fact that identity in Central Asia did not conform to their expectations of nationality or ethnicity” (2013). He quotes Russian ethnographer Vasily Bartold’s as saying that “the settled population of Central Asia think of themselves primarily as Muslims, and think of themselves as only secondarily living in a particular town or district; to them the idea of belonging to a particular people is of no significance” (2013). Localism was the main component of the people’s identity in the region. The inhabitants were deeply attached to their place of birth, geographical locations the mountainous and lowland regions (Buisson and Khusenova, 2011, 98). In that line Zarubi notes that as recent as the 1900s Uzbeks “called themselves Turks. But their Turkmen and Kyrgyz neighbors call them ‘Sart,’ a word they also use [to designate] Tajiks.”11

Soviet implosion led Central Asian countries to a disengagement from Moscow and to a process of nation and identity building, for if “Soviet authorities [had taken] upon themselves to become ‘nation-makers’ “(Isaacs and Polese, 2015, 372), they were not identity builders. The construction of national identity implies, of necessity, a lengthy process: “identities [are] constructed” overtime (Fedorenko, 2012, 4).

This chapter will look then at Rahmon’s ‘toolkit’ in nation national identity narratives as illustrated by three recurrent themes: a) Aryanism, Zoroastrianism, and the Samanids, distinct historical markers; b) Rogun dam, a modern nation identifier that combines the symbolic attributes ascribed to water and its potentiality as detonator of economic growth and national assertiveness; c) Islam in a secular context.

11 In (Kucera, 2013), see http://wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/summer-2014-where-have-all-the-jobs-gone/tajikistans-dream/
a) The unearthing of ‘Tajik’ roots: the Samanids, Zoroastrianism and Aryanism

The efforts undertaken to re-establish linkages with Persian and other ancient roots, have served Rahmon in his endeavours to undermining Islam’s centrality. In the Samanid period, for instance, he highlights the importance they attached to statehood. On Hanafism, he underlines Imam Abu Hanifa’s attachment to state as separate from religion. He also gives high centrality to Navruz. Rahmon’s public interventions on these subjects de-emphasize Islam’s importance. He blames in a veiled and not so veiled manner political opposition linking it to Islamic radicalism. Almost without exceptions all Rahmon’s public interventions are axed on unity, self-awareness, national unity, national security, millenary ancestry, strong statehood, national values and symbols, Tajiks’ generosity and endurance.

Rahmon started to unearth, to manipulate and appropriate some historical narratives in order to create an “imaginary of the nation” (Isaacs and Polese, 2015, 376). For over 25 years, he emerges as the only visible Tajik national identity architect, subtly engraining in his captive audience the perception that he incarnates independence, that he knows and shows the path towards national unity.

Rahmon’s nation’s main constituent elements are to be found in his book The Tajiks in the Mirror of History (1999), preceded, three year earlier, by an article by the same title, and are identified in three interlaced historical markers: the Samanids, Zoroastrianism and Aryanism (Laruelle, 2007) (Suyarkulova, 2013, 166-168). Tajikness is thus placed above the concept of territoriality: they refer to ancient culture, ethnie, language, and religious dimension (Buisson and Khusenova, 2011, 101-103) (Nourzhanov and Bleuer, 2013). The book “explains how traditions and historic concepts very much continue to shape much of Tajikistan’s modern history [and it] gives a very personal view on the history and identity as it is felt and experienced by the modern Tajik, whose roots lie in deep in the Persianate culture and history.” (Overlaet, 2014). In any event, the rewriting of historical narratives aims at highlighting Tajikistan’s ancient roots, preserved overtime. Rahmon is insistent on Tajiks’ Persian roots and invites them to “regard the history of our nation like a pure and holy mirror” (Yountchi, 2011, 228). Navruz has become in Rahmon’s national identity narrative a central marker.
**The Samanid period**

Rahmon’s narratives highlight the Samanid period as a glorious chapter in Tajiks history, and as a symbol of strong statehood. It is not a coincidence that two years after the end of the civil war he declared 1999 as the 1,100-year anniversary of the Samanid dynasty (897-907), an 11-meter statue of Amir Ismail Somoni was erected in Dushanbe to be revered as a national symbol (Buisson, 2008), and as a symbol of Tajikistan’s golden age and of national unity (Hanks, 2014, 121). By reinterpreting this period and by linking it to the present Rahmon establishes Tajikistan’s linkages with Persian culture (Suyarkulova, 2013, 167). In 2000 it adopted the somoni as the national currency (Buisson, 2008). It is since then a national emblem according to *Khovar.tj*. For the Tajik regime, national awareness emerged during the Samanids. In his 2013 Independence speech, Rahmon asserted that “[he was] convinced that for Tajikistan the XXI century [will be] as glorious as during Samanid epoch, [it] will be the century of independent Tajikistan and the era of outstanding progress of our ancient people.”

The unearthing and revival of the Samanids has another reading: this golden age was one characterised by a strong statehood. In contrast, Islamic opposition views it as a great period of Islam (Nourzhanov, 2014, 85) (Epkenhans, 2015, 342). For the regime, Tajiks under the Samanids must be seen as a lesson of national unity, independence and national awareness. As it was noted above, these themes are recurrent in his 2013 Independence day speech and in many others.

**Zoroastrianism**

In the same logic of identifying Tajikness in ancient times, Rahmon has embarked on establishing linkages with the Zoroastrian period, (628-551 B.C.) and implicitly deemphasising Islam. He views Zoroaster as “the first Prophet […] and the spiritual leader and guide of the Tajik people” (Laruelle, 2007, 54). In 2001, *Avesta and the*

---

12 see http://www.president.tj/en/node/5066

13 In his Independence speech, in 2013, Rahmon stated that the Tajiks should make sure “that independence along with the “people”, “homeland” and “unity” turns into an indivisible concept of existence, consciousness, philosophy and the fundamental value of life of every citizen of the country.”
worldwide civilization\textsuperscript{14}, a collection of sacred Zoroastrian texts, was presented. He declared that year as Avesta’s 2 700-anniversary. In 2003 the Tajik-UNESCO’s book From Songs of Zarathustra to Melodies of Borbad was published, the same year when UNESCO officialised the “3000\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary of the Zoroastrian Civilization” (Blakkirsud and Nozimova, 2010, 187).

Zoroastrianism has been portrayed as a ‘national religion’, thus diminishing the importance of Islam in Tajik society. Up until 2000, the seven stars on the Tajik flag contained Zoroastrian symbols. In an as yet unexplained change they now represent the seven sociocultural centres of the country (Buisson and Khusenova, 2011, 110). Both, king Somoni, elevated to the rank of national hero and the revival of Zoroastrianism have enabled Rahmon to make a case for the existence of Aryan roots in the Tajik population: “Ismail Somoni remained unfailingly faithful […] to the elements of Aryan statehood” (Laruelle, 2007, 54).

\textbf{Aryanism}

In his efforts to underline Tajikistan’s Aryan roots, Rahmon declared 2006 Aryan Culture Year. It was meant to be the revival of the “great culture of the Aryan people” (\textit{Lenta.ru}, 2005)\textsuperscript{15}. Having no qualms with any incongruity or with being plainly wrong, in The Tajiks in the Mirror of History, Rahmon affirms that the: “The word ‘Tajik’ is a synonym of the word ‘Aryan’, which means generous and noble. Modern Tajik language identifies this word with ‘having a crown’ and ‘peace loving people’ ” (Marat, 2008, 21). By putting Aryanism at the forefront the regime seeks to portray Tajikistan as a humanist, pacifist and an entirely modern nation. Rahmon mentioned in 2011 that “the Aryan civilization, spiritual heritage of [our] ancestors who built [our] culture is one of the roots of the world civilization”\textsuperscript{16}. In his nation building narratives, he makes total abstraction of the diverse ethnic minorities within Tajikistan. Suyarkulova argues that Tajik historiography is based on ethnic claims, which “looks beyond the borders” of the current Tajik state and that seems to reveal the idea of a “lost ‘promised land’ of the ancestral homeland” (2013, 162).

\textsuperscript{15} See https://lenta.ru/news/2005/12/09/rahmonov/
\textsuperscript{16} See the 2011 Independence speech at http://www.president.tj/en/node/2559
It seems rather clear that in the narratives it permeates an effort at “ethnic homogeneisation” (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2006, 82). This underlying intention has been accentuated by the linguistic politics, as Tajik is the sole national language, springing in Samarkand, Bukhara, Tajikistan’s historical fiefdoms (Buisson and Khusenova, 2011, 98). In Rahmon’s vision, the Tajik nation is understood as comprised of an ancestral ethnie, a unique language, a central state in a delimited territory. These four elements (language, ethnie, state and territorial borders) to which Smith and others allude as constituents of a nation, were present already under the Soviet Union (Guibernau, 2004) (Omelicheva, 2014).

Rahmon sees in all these celebrations a chance to “promote the development and intensification of self-awareness, national unity and patriotic pride” (2006)\textsuperscript{17}. During the 2006 New Year’s speech he insisted that these celebrations are meant to prove the “sacred, scientific and historical values of the civilised Tajik people” and that its ancient culture is clearly different from Uzbekistan’s Turkic roots. These narratives “place the Tajik ethnie much earlier in Central Asia than any proto-Turkic/Uzbek presence” (Hanks, 2014, 123).

Rahmon highlights the importance of Aryanism and Zoroastrianism so as to distance them from Turkic influence and, in passing, it underscores antiquity and secularity. Suyarkulova points out that by underlining the roots dimension Rahmon seeks to portray the sedentary Tajiks as the “indigenous people of the region” (2013, 165), yet culturally interlinked with other cultures and regions such as Kurds, Iranians, Afghans, Indians and Europeans. He affirms that “in the span of their long history the Tajiks made a substantial contribution to the world culture” (1999, 109)\textsuperscript{18}. He makes obvious abstraction of other ethnies living in that Soviet designed country, Uzbeks for instance.

Rahmon is not alone in this approach. Soviet scholars such as Bobodzhan Gafurov had already underlined the link between Aryanism and Tajikistan. He had tried to prove the antiquity of the Tajik people (Laruelle, 2007) (Hanks, 2014). In his 2004

\textsuperscript{17} See 2006 Speech to the Parliament at http://www.prezident.tj/en/node/10611

\textsuperscript{18} In (Marat, 2008, 20)
national independence speech Rahmon said that Gafurov “had practically established the tradition of modern Tajik people [...] This tradition proves that we Tajiks do not have any needs for rewriting of the history.”

It is worth noting that, in official discourse and celebrations, these narratives are quite recurrent prior to elections, which renders them highly political. They were clearly abundant in 2006. That year several publications were released— all dedicated to Rahmon’s national identity narratives such as Emomali Rahmon: Year of Culture That Conquered the World and Emomali Rahmon: The Year of the Aryan Civilization (Marat, 2008, 20). Rahmon’s insistence on Tajiks’ ancestral roots, their inscription in the political calendar must also be seen as part of his power building process, and especially as permanent legitimacy tools. In time all this will lead to he becoming the national unity symbol, of which he is the guarantor, aware that “in the course of [its] history the Tajik nation has been confronted by all sorts of vehement opponents who doubted its very existence” (Rahmon, 1999).

This idea is still very present in his speeches: Tajikistan survived due to the strength and sense of unity of Tajiks. However the dangers are still there and the people of Tajikistan must be unified, be patriotic and implicitly stay behind the Leader, a highly recurrent advise in his speeches to the young generations. In a variation on the same theme, in his 2015 National Unity speech, Rahmon recalled that “in order to destroy a country, it is enough to destroy its languages and culture”, thus the importance to recognise and identify with their cultural ancestors. It is pertinent to recall that Rahmon is highly selective: he underlines Tajik greatness and only by inference he refers to a crucial chapter in Tajikistan’s history, the civil war. On that angle, Matveeva is blunt: “the major gap in Rahmon’s ideology is that it does not provide an official, plausible interpretation of the history of the 1992-1997 war” (2009, 1107). And this position is reflected particularly in the education (since the 2000s): historical books vaguely mention the 1992-1997 episode (Roche, 2013). At times it seems an intended political amnesia. The regime’s reinterpretation of history as the foundation

---

19 See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2568
21 See http://president.tj/en/node/9242
of nation building and national identity construction a top-down exercise where the targeted audience plays a passive role, something proper of an increasingly autocratic regime, where the leader dictates the course, and where the young generations do not have enough historical references to feel and be part of what Rahmon insistently tries to instil. This reinterpretation underscoring Rahmon’s role in the peace-making process helps him also to delegitimize other competing political actors, mainly the IRPT.

In the end, in Rahmon’s narratives, symbols and myths are of essence, and they encompass more than flags, anthems, emblems and currency. Internally, symbols perpetuate the idea of nation, and project it externally. Myths are therefore essential to foster a common cultural and historical ground. They are, what Armstrong has categorised as *mythomoteur*. This *mythomoteur* is a system that centres on myths and “heroic figures from antiquity, which defines the historical and cultural parameters of identity” (Hanks, 2014, 113). The purpose of such a system is to associate the ethnic populations with a homeland and all that which it entails.

Seemingly Rahmon’s purpose has been to set up a framework in which the people of Tajikistan feel and affirm their common identity. The incumbent dug out mythological narratives in order to cement ethnic symbols: the presumed intrinsic connection with Aryanism, Zoroastrianism and the Samanid empire rendered Tajiks unique and pure in the region. The question still remains as to how effective those narratives are: symbols and myths gain in efficiency if the people can interpret them and appropriate them (Cummings, 2010). And as Matveeva (2009) points out, symbolism is political as it reveals how state leaders perform in front of their audience and underscores the efficiency of performative narratives, clearly displayed throughout Rahmon’s nation building narratives, and by means of the celebration and inscription in the cultural, thus political, calendar.
b) Water as a modern national identity narrative: Rogun dam

“Rogun is our all - motherland, faith, future, unity.” (Rahmon, 2010)\textsuperscript{22}

Rahmon has anchored his narratives on nation building and national identity on Tajikistan's millenary roots. Rogun dam, a narrative in the making, comprises in itself the attributes of a timeless symbol, water, and the potentiality of detonating economic development. A top-down project, if and when completed, it may be a public work that may strengthen national identity and, through this performative initiative, enhance legitimacy.

Paradoxically, in its origins, Rogun is an unfinished Soviet project. For Central Asia water is central. The Syr and the Amu Darya rivers, originating in the Pamir region are the backbone of water politics (Kushkumbayev and Kushkumbayeva, 2013, 212). The ‘cross-bordering’ characteristic of water resources is reflected in the two clear-cut position between the upstream (Uzbekistan mainly, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan) and downstream countries (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan).

As the least developed country, poor in raw materials, yet rich in water resources, Rahmon has rendered its management and ownership a national development issue. International, regional, bilateral agreements, committees and meetings proliferate: the 1992 Agreement on Cooperation in Joint Management Use and Protection of Water Resources of Inter-State Sources; the statute of the Interstate Coordination Water Commission (ICWC), created in 1992, focused on water management solutions (Central Eurasia Standard, 2013, 6). Yet, unsolved difficulties stall water energy projects (Kushkumbayev and Kushkumbayeva, 2013, 212). Rahmon seeks to make of water Tajikistan’s economic detonator, thus his insistence in re-launching Rogun.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} In (Féaux de la Croix and Suyarkulova, 2015, 115)

\textsuperscript{23} Average surface water flow is about 64km\textsuperscript{3} per year. Tajikistan uses about 18% of the flow originated in its territory and it is used in agriculture: It provides up to 90% for agricultural production (Asian Development Bank, 2013). This sector represents 20% of Tajikistan’s GDP and absorbs 53% of
In addition to ancient roots nation building narratives, from the second half of the past decade, water began to occupy a central place in his official and public pronouncements. Aware of its economic and political potential, at the discursive level Rahmon started to appropriate water and to make of it a Tajik feature. As early as 2008 he said that “hydropower engineering is the main wealth of [the] country” (2008).24 Years later, on the same theme he affirmed that Tajikistan’s future “depends on effective and wise use of hydro-power, since only energy security can give considerable impetus to developing and expansion of all economic spheres of Tajikistan” (2011).25 Water became a multi-value good in economic and political terms, an instrument to enhance nation building and to widen and cement his power base, a keystone in his efforts to be seen as the real independence maker, the main articulator of national identity.

Rahmon has highlighted the importance of water to reinforce regional cooperation. The Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project, CASA-1000-would be a case in point: last May 2016 he stated that “Construction of South-North, Lolazor-Khatlon and Tajikistan-Afghanistan electricity transmission lines with the length of more than 670 km are among the completed projects”26. Started in 2006, it has meant a $1,800 million U.S. dollars investment on the part of Tajikistan. It involves major regional and world financial institutions and country cooperation.

According to Rahmon, “Tajikistan has huge hydropower capacity and [it is] possible to generate 527 billion kw/hours of electricity […]not only for our benefit, but also for the benefit of the wider Central and South Asia.”27

Casa-1000 Project seems to fit in legitimacy endeavours or, as it has been termed performative actions. In other words, these grandiose public works are in themselves “pillars of legitimisation.” (Maetveeva, 2009, 1119). Féaux de la Croix and Suyarkulova point out that “many large dams becomes synonymous with nation-

---

24 See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2562
25 See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2559
26 See http://www.president.tj/en/node/11700
27 Ibid
building and have sometimes served as icons for the life of entire generations.” (2015, 109). Whenever its completion is achieved, Rogun will symbolize “a fundamental leap forward in national development, an existential achievement for the survival of the country” (Menga, 2015, 490). For Rahmon, “Rogun [is] a life and death issue” (Dubnov, 2009), and going ahead with the project may have an impact on regional balance of power. From another angle it has been noted that “over these last ten years, one can see that state building has been a strong driving force and water was one of the main issues that was dealt in order to accumulate the state’s power” (Allouche, 2005, 187).

From the mid 2000 onwards, Rahmon began to orient his national and foreign policy emphasizing water issues. As a Tajik symbol it began to appear in public positioning and in various political contexts. In 2006, at the Navruz speech, Rahmon claimed that the “gigantic hydraulic dam, Sangtuda and Rogun, secures the energy independence of our country and [allows] our beloved Tajikistan to foster its own place among the developed countries.” Rogun, as a modern national symbol had to be gigantic, much in accordance with a certain megalomaniac trait of his, both in terms of height, of electricity production capacity (Central Eurasia Standard, 2013, 9). It will mean the end of power shortages.

Rogun is presented by the regime as an example of ‘mass participation’ and a ‘patriotic act’, although behind a so-called ‘voluntary’ act, coercive methods have been used and abused: portions of salaries, pensions, students stipends have been withheld and invested in the Rogun dam capital (Menga, 2015, 486) (Suyarkulova, 2014, 375). In December 2009, Avesta.tj announced that “Dushanbe-dwellers will celebrate the Day of Unity in Construction of Rogun on January 6 [2010]” (Suyarkulova, 2014, 376), when the state began (coercively) selling Rogun shares, labelled People’s Initial Public Offering, IPO. Rahmon has claimed that: “this sacrifice for Rogun and the acquisition of the share is an exceptional voluntarily act- we do not force anyone to do it […] you do not build me, you build Tajik statehood!” (Dubnov,

28 See http://www.president.tj/ru/node/1474
29 Rogun dam will be 335 meters tall, the highest dam in the world. It will generate 3600 megawatts, twice of the country’s current capacity (Kucera, 2013). Official figures set annual electricity generation at 16.5 billion kWh (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015).
A few months later he called upon Tajiks to “tighten our belts and overcome the hardship. I wish us perseverance in this difficult but sacred undertaking.” (Avesta.tj, 2010)30.

Since 2010 the value of shares sold amounted to 830 million somoni (188.5 million dollars), meaning that two million Tajiks are Rogun’s shareholders31. Despite the ‘voluntary’ shares purchase, Féaux de la Croix and Suyarkulova describe the obstacles they faced when talking to the Tajiks on the Rogun dam project: “Government agencies were very concerned with controlling the region, including access by foreign research teams [wishing] to speak with locals” (2015, 108). Menga sees Rogun as a state ideology in which “rhetorical legitimation strategies” build up national patriotic consciousness (2015, 480).

Seen as a tool of economic development and as a nationhood symbol, the dam may be also understood as a vehicle to instil nationalism amongst Tajiks, at least to the extent that the message may end-up permeating Tajiks’ imaginary. Yet two preconditions would have to be met: that the dam becomes an identity magnet, and that Tajiks themselves act and feel part of it. In any event, from Tajikistan’s official perspective, Rogun is more than a dam, it is the visibility of the immaterial understanding of the nation.

In addition to enhancing patriotic sentiments, Rogun cements Rahmon’s power-building and political presence. This theme has been emphasized prior to the 2010 parliamentary elections. Avesta.tj is particularly laudatory, affirming that Tajiks show, “genuine enthusiasm” and a “profound patriotic exaltation” on the dam (Sattori, 2010). For Suyarkulova (2014), Menga (2015), and Cariou (2015) it is an emblem in the making and, as a top-down initiative, those at the receiving end left with no other option than supporting it. It could very well be that, contrary to official discourse, Rogun might be a symbol of coercion.

In his obsessive reference to the dam and its ever presence in Tajiks daily lives, Rahmon (2010) points out that “Rogun is not only a mere source of light but it is a

30 In (Suyarkulova, 2014, 375)
source of dignity and national honour.” (Cariou 2015, 40). His insistence on the virtues and potential of the dam seeks to generate consent, as everything seems to be anchored on the dam. Rogun, insists official rhetoric, is the solution and there is no other alternative to country’s socioeconomic development, and that regardless of the recent discovery of natural gas and oil resources in the western part of the country that, it is claimed, equals twice those of Norway’s proven reserves (Central Eurasia Standard, 2013, 13). It must be added that the incumbent prioritizes form rather than content. The laudatory dimension gets out of proportion: on April 4th 2010, Khovar.tj announced that it would publish “samples of poems and prose of nearly a hundred representatives of the Tajik intelligentsia”, underlining Rogun’s virtues. In that line, gigantic posters representing the dam construction with Rahmon standing next to it, the media press releases and the personal implication of the president have inundated public spaces.

Rahmon has used Rogun as an international visibility platform: soon after this national project was launched, Tajikistan became the ‘water country’ and the ‘environmentally friendly’. Unsurprisingly, in 2013, Tajikistan organized the International Year of Water cooperation, putting forward also agreements as “the water-project leading country” (Menga, 2015, 489). Water allowed Tajikistan to be seen from a much different perspective than that of a semi-failed state, struggling to come out of the civil war aftermath and as a famine struck country. Again on water cooperation matters, in February 2014, Sulton Rahimov, the First Deputy Minister of Energy and Water Resources recalled that “the country actively promotes water issues on the global agenda and is the initiator of almost all “water” resolutions of UN General Assembly in the past decade.”

Initially a Soviet initiative, it was revived in the middle of 2010s, presented by Rahmon as a “joyful and memorable event” (2006). Financial difficulties and technical objections have stalled progress. Yet, in 2014, the World Bank released a

33 See http://eptoday.com/tajikistan-turn-water-cooperation/
34 Rogun plans were elaborated between 1965-1972 and the construction started in 1982 and halted in 1991. In 2004, Rahmon re-launched its construction, undertaken by Russia’s aluminium company RusAl. Works Disagreements led to the dam project stopped in 2007 due to disagreements.
35 See http://www.prezident.tj/ru/node/6118
positive report, approving its construction (Féaux de la Croix and Suyarkulova, 2015, 116). Rahmon claims that Rogun meets international technical norms and that its “construction follows the original plans”. He maintains further that it has been approved by the “World Bank, foreign independent experts, foreign companies specialised in this area” (Rahmon, 2015)36. Paradoxically, when nature seems to point out potential fault lines, for instance the 7,2 seism that on December the 7th 2015 hit Tajikistan, and which caused some casualties. The project, wrote Khabibov, was “in the hands of Allah!” He added that “most of the experts […] speak with one voice that Rogun construction will continue” (Khabibov, 2015).

At a bilateral level, Rahmon has accused Uzbekistan of hindering Tajikistan’s development policies. Clearly, the dam brings head to head two equally determined and authoritarian leaders Rahmon and Karimov. Rahmon’s and Karimov’s animosity is a well-known fact as reported by Vremya.ru (2009)37. With undoubted clarity he affirmed that “Tashkent’s willingness to isolate Tajikistan from the outside world didn’t begin yesterday” (2010)38. Avesta.tj (2010), put it bluntly: Uzbekistan should “bury its ambitions”39 to put obstacles to the project. In essence the meaning behind the Rogun ideology is that Tajikistan masters its water resources. A country which controls its resources is a country that has the capacity to master its territory. In turn this legitimizes the state. The tense relations with Uzbekistan over water resources crystallized on the Rogun dam and highlighted the importance of the national territory, thus sovereignty and independence. Be that as it may, the dam has become a legitimizing factor. It has allowed the leader to strengthen (forced) consensus and cement internal power, and attain greater external assertiveness (Daly, 2015).

Rahmon has made so many claims as to what the dam will accomplish (materially and immaterially) that he risks being caught by the weight of his own words. Yet, it appears that he cannot retreat: halting its construction would portray Rahmon as a weak leader, and that would run contrary to his aim of making Rogun his modern national identity narrative, his chef d’oeuvre, and legacy to the country. Whether and

39 Ibid
when it will finally be completed, remains to be seen. This year an Italian company, Salini Impregilo, was chosen to continue the project. Yet its financing is still uncertain (Eurasianet.org, 2016). Thus, in the end, Rogun as a modern narrative rests much upon objective, material considerations beyond and besides the Leader’s rhetoric.

c) The place of Islam under Rahmon’s regime

The Soviet Union implosion brought to the forefront questions as to what would be the role and place of Islam in the region, how would it evolve and accommodate to the new political reality, and how the new leaderships would approach and control potentially disruptive religious activism.

From its arrival in Central Asia in the 7th century AD (Kalanov and Alonso, 2008, 175), Islam made its presence felt and still continues to perform a key role in society. A well-integrated faith, it was not a disruptive actor under the Soviet Union. At first an iron-hand strategy was applied resulting in “mass elimination and emigration of institutional clergy in the early years of the Soviet regime” (Olimova, 2011, 3) which afterwards adopted a rather flexible approach. From the 1940s, “the USSR regulated a state-sanctioned version of Islam through the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan”, the SADUM (Epkenhans, 2015, 334). The SADUM, present in the five republics, defined and regulated Islamic practice in a bureaucratic manner, and with greater autonomy under Perestroika. Heathershaw and Montgomery affirm that this was due to a process of co-optation which led to a highly efficient modus operandi (2014, 1). Indeed, it was a sort of laisser-faire within an institutional functional framework that allowed for a subtle and well-controlled Islam in a secular society.

The Soviet Union fall fed apprehension on the risk of Islamic fundamentalism, particularly in Central Asia. If Soviet collapse had meant political independence, for Islam, as practiced throughout the region, it signified the removal of any major constraints to interact, diversify and create linkages with Islamic forces throughout and beyond Central Asia. From that reading, the conditions existed for the region to enter into a turbulent religious phase. Security approaches have proliferated ever-since, often not well-supported and frequently biased, or hardly objective, as
Heathershaw and Montgomery (2014) have pointed out.

Independence had been preceded by intense debate on regional, economic and religious matters, national identity and, of course, the role of Islam. Rahmon himself has pointed out that “it is worth noting that the late 80s of the XX century saw the emergence of political forces that initiated the debates on nation-building” (2012)\(^\text{40}\). Yet, he very soon accuses them of leading a struggle for power more than by nation building concerns, affirming bluntly that what those activists aimed at was to “transform the secular state into Islamic rule”, and that it was this underlying goal which led to “internal confrontation” (ibid).

For Rahmon the civil war meant that if he were to prevail he had to restrain, manipulate and control Islamic and other potentially disruptive forces. He knew of the necessity to craft a solid and ever-wider power base. In this enterprise nation building and national identity construction became fundamental, and also to determine the role that Islam should play. This was particularly important given the role of the IRPT in Islamic matters and in the armed struggle. Islam therefore emerged for the regime as a clear political target. Throughout his speeches, when making veiled references to the IRPT and unnamed foreign actors, Rahmon alludes to Islamic disruptive forces\(^\text{41}\), something rather far from reality because Sunni Hanafism is highly centred on the community and seldom interested on matters beyond the national level.

Therefore, in the logic of Tajik civil war, ascribing to the IRPT a destabilising agenda is not objectively justified. It has been maintained that its cadres identified themselves with an inward-looking Islam, and whatever extremist positions were very soon abandoned. Nourzhanov points out that the Party’s platform hardly shows any radical positioning (2014, 77). The IRPT “shifted their agenda from demanding the abolition of the secular state and the introduction of Islamic radicalism to a more pragmatic, tolerant stance” (Olimova, 2011, 4). Yet, Rahmon was very distrustful of the IRPT and quickly moved to reform the bureaucratic structures that regulated Islamic practices (Nourzhanov and Bleuer, 2013, 335-336). He also gradually and swiftly began to

\(^{40}\) Rahmon in his 15\(^{\text{th}}\) Anniversary of the General Speech on the occasion of the 15th Anniversary of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan (26/06/12).

\(^{41}\) In his 2011 Independence speech : http://www.president.tj/en/node/2559
portrait the IRPT as being the cause and at the root of civil strife. In the same logic, he started to pay lip-service to Islam and its main historical figures: “unfortunately, some extremist and fundamentalist groups have [...] tried to separate national & Islamic values [...] It is worth remembering that 97% of Tajikistan’s population are followers of Imam Abu Hanifa. We are very proud that the founder of the most influential current in Islam is a noble son of the Tajik nation” (Rahmon, 2008).

Fears of fundamentalist Islamic upheaval played into Rahmon’s hands: neighbouring countries in particular and the West in general would be if not overtly complacent at least understanding if iron-hand were used to contain political opposition and dissent. On the basis of fieldwork, Heathershaw and Montgomery harshly discard as myths claims of post-Soviet Muslim radicalisation. Those myths “may provide the basis for common threat perceptions, collaboration in counter-radicalization initiatives and international security assistance in the region” (2014, 1). According to them “the few radical groups that exist and violent events that occur are better understood on a case-by case basis and not as part of a supposed general trend of radicalization” (2014, 3).

In what it relates to the bureaucratic structures regulating Islam’s practices, Rahmon began a gradual yet in-depth reorganization to bring them under his control. Rahmon began to refer to Islam as one among other important factors in national identity building and to curtail its visibility. In fact, “the political nomenklatura [considered that] depicting any form of public religiosity outside the official institutions [was] a manifestation of extremism or fundamentalism instigated from abroad” (Epkenhans, 2015, 329). He also started to restructure religious official institutions, replace their top officials, and give them a new political orientation. The aim was to reduce the autonomy they had acquired during perestroika. The subordination of those structures has been the work of Saidmiukarram Abdulgodirzoda, appointed by Rahmon and in charge of both, the Islamic Centre and the Council of Tajikistan’s ulamo, He has reformed the academic curriculum of the Islamic University, the Islamic secondary schools, promoted quietist traditional Islamic approaches and regime-loyalty. At a clearly political level, since 2012 the Islamic Centre has imposed Friay’s prayer topic. For the March 2015 parliamentary elections it suggested for whom vote (Epkenhans, 2015, 329). The intention is to occupy all spaces, orient
reflection and control Islamic clergy structures. This manipulation does not impede Rahmon from proclaiming his attachment to democracy. In his 2012 speech on National Unity Day, he asserted that “it is of critical importance for this generation to deeply realize the vital role of [...] national unity in building a democratic and fair society”\(^{42}\).

Related to that, and to generational changes, Laruelle argues that the new generations will have a constructive impact upon Islam and democracy and, therefore, on the place this religion occupies in secular societies. The influence and role of young generations will also have an effect on how the ruling elites tackle religious matters. Governments will have to be attentive to the young generations’ concerns on religion. Laruelle further argues that this will give an impulse to democracy (2015, 5). In what it concerns Tajikistan she asserts that “despite its weakening at the hand of President Emomali Rakhmon’s, [...] the IRPT constitutes a major element of Tajik political life and that it has obliged the authorities to be more liberal than their Uzbek, Turkmen, or even Kazakh counterparts” (2015, 2). Yet, Laruelle makes abstraction of the regimes contradictory positioning: Rahmon declares his attachment to democracy and, at the same time, through the Islamic Centre and the Department of Religious Affairs, controls the administrative, political and ideological orientations of the Islamic clergy. Placing too much emphasis on generational changes and less on the autocratic nature of the regime led her to make unsubstantiated claims: not only was the IRPT prevented from participating in the 2015 elections, in September of that year the Tajik courts banned the IRPT, ruling the party was a terrorist organization (McGlinchey, 2015, 5) (Khamidova, 2016).

Throughout time it has become evident that, as he has strengthened his grip on power, Rahmon does not admit any challenge to his authority. Apparently, in his view Islam should be a tool that enhances social cohesiveness. Therefore, any “Muslim who challenges the government is depicted as a ‘radical’ [and] a threat to society. In defining radicalism in this way [...] all opposition [can be considered] extremist and potentially violent.” (Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014, 7). Rahmon’s regime has introduced various control measures: men have to shave their beard, imams are

\(^{42}\) See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2199
given new uniforms, women must not wear hijabs or any other Islamic traditional outfits (Najibullah and Recknagel, 2015) (Putz, 2015).

After a quarter of a century, the place of Islam in Tajikistan’s secular society has shifted from being practiced with relative ease and in a highly autonomous and harmonious manner, to an increasingly subordinated role to specific governmental structures. At the same time, much in line with his proclivity to manipulate the main constituent pillars in his nation building narratives, Rahmon has deployed every effort to project Islam as a religion that has adapted itself to the traits and features of the nation. He has gone as far as saying that “Islam has [intermingled] with our ancient culture and now it is an integral part of our culture” (Rahmon, 2009).

Throughout his long stay in office, he is keenly aware of the necessity (and of the potential advantage) to pay tribute to Islam and, at the same time, engaging in political recuperation of key historical Islamic figures: 2009 was the 1310 commemorative anniversary of Imam Abu Hanifa. He used the occasion to underscore that the Imam was a state builder who insisted on obedience to established authority. In his keynote speech at *The International Symposium on Imam A’zam and the modern world* (2009), he underscored Abu Hanifa’s teachings more as they relate to universal values than to Hanifa’s view of Islam. The Symposium’s intention was “to draw the attention of the world community to [Abu Hanifa’s] valuable doctrine including first of all the peace-loving aspects of his teachings, given today’s volatile situation, because these values strengthen unity [and] mutual understanding”43.

Along those lines, any occasion seems to be good enough to insist that the place of Islam is central, but that it is not the centre, and that Tajikistan’s history shows how main world religions have coexisted in tolerance and without any hindrance. Thus on the occasion of Tajikistan 16th independence anniversary, coinciding with the 800 anniversary of the poet Mowlana Jaloloddini Balkhi, Rahmon, reminded that during the poet’s lifetime “Islam played a key role in society, and there was no restriction for other religions, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism” (2007)44. He added that

43 See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2522

humankind is the creation of God, implicitly saying that no religion is above other religions, Islam included.

In essence, Rahmon’s view is that Islam should unite and must not be above the state. Additionally, the manner in which it is practiced as well as the structures that norm those who conduct it and orient its practice have to be controlled. He has clearly warned against “the constant growing trend of politicization of Islam [because it] is detrimental to the religion.” (2015)\(^45\). He boasts that the regime had published 50 thousand issues of the Koran.

In his nation building narratives, Rahmon has de-emphasized Islam’s importance, has reformed and subordinated its bureaucratic structures and put them firmly under state’s control, and has appropriated Islamic figures such as Abu Hanifa, underscoring their public dimensions. He has purely and simply done away with political opposition, the IRPT, a political structure central to the reconciliation process and party to the General Peace Agreement signed in 1997. The IRPT, a political institution that had embarked in a wider debate that went beyond electoral politics and was centred on the place of Islam in a pluralistic society. In exile, the leader of the now banned IRPT, having referred to his party refusal to take the armed path, said: “I do not regret that we have chosen the path of tolerance and restrain” (Khamidova, 2016).

The preceding narratives have sought to illustrate how Rahmon has tried to engrain his vision of a nation and to consolidate his grip on power.

\(^{45}\) See 2015 Speech to the Parliament http://president.tj/en/node/8141
Chapter 4: Autocracy consolidated: Rahmon, the making of a national symbol

This chapter will illustrate how state’s structures have crafted and inscribed into law the symbol of the Leader as the incarnation of national unity. It shows expressions of support to such symbol-making process, as reported by state’s news agencies; finally, it will centre on some performative initiatives, or “Great Distractions”\textsuperscript{46}, depicting Rahmon’s uncontested power.

a) The role of state’s structures in the making of Rahmon as a national symbol

Rahmon’s quest of total power results from two intertwined endeavours: nation building and national identity construction, on the one hand, and the articulation and gradual cementation of political power, on the other. In what it pertains power, his manoeuvring to call for a national referendum to reform the Constitution paved the way for Parliament to pass a law that has declared him \textit{The founder of peace and national unity-the Leader of the Nation}\textsuperscript{47}. This has been achieved in a sure and gradual manner.

The president’s speeches shed light on his preoccupations, obsessions and political phobias. His insistence may lead the reader to doubt as to how efficient or how successful those policies have been. Such recurrent themes convey also the possibility that Rahmon himself is not fully convinced that his discourses and policies have been understood and integrated by the people. Additionally, it is worth noting that there is neither clear logic nor thematic organization in the official discourses, whose topics are of two types: public policies, and conceptual. On public policies, year after year Rahmon has emphasized great social achievements on governmental reforms, educational progress, energy, communication infrastructure, food security, water management, for instance, as well as on the role of the youth and women in the construction of a modern state, and on science and technology. Rahmon as

\footnote{46}Expression taken from Pannier in The first 40 days: an Introduction \url{http://www.rferl.mobi/a/the-first-40-days-introduction-central-asia/27587345.html}

\footnote{47}From now onwards I will refer to the Law of the Leader or the Law
someone attentive to anything concerning Tajikistan, he gives advices and warns on issues potentially harmful for the country. Globalization can be beneficial and harmful, and he suggests to be prudent: in one of his many speeches, Rahmon ask Tajiks “to promote the supreme values of our ancient people in the context of globalization. This process, along with its positive aspects [implies also] a clash of values and of cultures.” (2013)\(^{48}\). He warns on the threat of extremism and terrorism. In his speech to Parliament in February 2016, he declared that the fight against: “terrorism and extremism requires developing an environment of trust and respect of everybody’s interest, [as well].”\(^{49}\)

In what it pertains to conceptual references related to national identity, his speeches abound with themes such as: national unity, solidarity, independence and sovereignty, self-consciousness, modern nation, patriotism, national pride, united territory and territorial integrity. Their recurrence allows us to infer that for Rahmon the process of nation building is not yet achieved. He hammers on them as if by so doing he will succeed in instilling those values in the audience. If we were to single out three of the most recurrent conceptual themes, “national unity”, “state independence” and “national sovereignty” would be on top. From the manner in which they are dealt with in speeches, official sites and news agencies, it is implied that these values and pillars of nationhood are constantly reinforced by the *Leader*. On its website *Khovar.tj* has a quote by Rahmon that clearly subsumes his thinking on the subject:

*National Unity is for us the most valuable and high achievement, a fundamental condition for the well-being of our people and the fundamental development and progress of our beloved Motherland.*

Nation building and national identity construction have gone hand in hand with Rahmon’s power building. Buisson maintains that there has been a “prioritization of a power-building strategy on state-building since the Kulobis took power” in reference to the region from which he comes from (Buisson, 2007, 115). Throughout that long process he has become the uncontested *Leader*, the incarnation of the values he


\(^{49}\) See http://www.prezident.tj/en/node/10608
ascribes to the nation and to the state. That portrait is reflected in the Law of the Leader. From another angle, Rahmon insists that his government’s policies are law-abiding: on September 2015, he celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Constitutional Court, which proofs, in his view, that Tajikistan is “democratic and law-based country”\(^{50}\). He maintains that Tajikistan has solid and independent legal institutions and that they are the foundations “of a fair society [because] it is impossible to imagine [it] without independent judiciary [power]”\(^{51}\). In this regard, the institutional symbols help to “apply coercion in a targeted fashion and [are part of the] discursive narratives to shore up Rahmon’s support” (Markowitz, 2012, 99). Depending on specific contextual situations, Rahmon’s methods try to be persuasive and give proper advice for the wellbeing of society. So referring to the difficult international economic situation, and how it impacts upon Tajikistan, he affirms that every citizen “is obliged to perform […] in a creative way [in order to] enhance the economic potential of [the country]” (2016)\(^{52}\). Or he is blunt when he speaks of presumed threats to the integrity of the nation supposedly performed at the instigation of the IRPT, calling them “traitors” and warning that they will not be successful.

That cementation of political (and, it is assumed, economic) power has been articulated by the interlinking of gradual and clear legislative building blocks that led to the enactment of the Law of the Leader. Two prior milestones are worth noting: last December 25th 2015, after the unanimous approval by the Majlisi Milli Majlisi Oli (Upper House) and then by the Majlisi Namayandagon Majlisi Oli (Lower House), Rahmon was officially declared The founder of peace and national unity and the Leader of the Nation. The legislative power had already approved and established the President Day. Coincidentally, Rahmon’s day takes place each November 16, the day he officially took power (16/11/92) (ASIA-Plus, 2016). The culminating building block in the construction of the political pedestal is the Law of the Leader.

The law was preceded by a legalistic due process: Parliament, sole “source of state power” according to article 6 of the Constitution (Kolomova, 2016), elevated Rahmon

---

\(^{50}\) See [http://www.president.tj/en/node/9952](http://www.president.tj/en/node/9952)

\(^{51}\) Ibid

to the rank of Leader of the Nation. Reality is, of course, more prosaic: Parliament is, in essence, subservient to the president, whose People’s Democratic Party has total majority, the upper house has 33 seats, and the lower house 63, whose members were presumably nominated by Rahmon. Public figures from whatever field of activity would hardly defend independent positions\(^{53}\). Primary sources show that the Law of the Leader required amendments and reforms to the Constitution. Such changes, not specifically detailed and available abroad, were approved by Parliament on 22\(^{nd}\) of February of this year\(^{54}\). To give greater credence to that legalistic process a referendum was organised in order to give people the opportunity to participate in such direct democratic exercise. According to Eurasia.net, the question put to the voters was plain: “Do you support changes to the constitution? Yes or no” (Eurasianet.org, 2016). The referendum took place on the 22\(^{nd}\) of May 2016. Foreign newspapers highlight that its outcome increases Rahmon’s power by legally putting him as the ruler for life. It also paves the way for the Leader’s successor, much likely his son\(^{55}\).

In the official discourses, the referendum reflects Tajik’s political position. A note published on the presidential website\(^{56}\), the day of the referendum, praises the “broad participation of the people” as it underlines the “high political culture” and the their support of peace, stability and socio-economic development of the country. The note portrays Rahmon as part of such an “important political event”. According to Avesta.tj (2016) the participation turnout was nearly 4.4 million voters, out of nearly 4.5 million registered ones. In other words, 92% of the total registered voters participated in the referendum, and 94.7% voted in favour.

The referendum may be seen as evidence of Rahmon’s grip on state power, a process that had accelerated since the end of the civil war. In turn, the law making of him the symbol of national unity draws a portrait on the borderlines of a sanctified

\(^{53}\) Figures in http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2903

\(^{54}\) See http://ru.parlament.tj/news/izmeneniya-i-dopolneniya-v-konstituciyu- RESPUBLIKI-TADZHIKISTAN/


\(^{56}\) see http://www.president.tj/en/node/11815
ruler. Additionally, it renders clear the subordinated character of Parliament, as illustrated in one of its statements:

[The] draft of this law is developed taking into account the valuable contribution of His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Leader of the Nation Mr. Emomali Rahmon in the formation of modern statehood of the country, revival of the national government, promotion of peace, unity and enhancement of the authority of Tajikistan in international arena (Parliament.tj, 2016).

Parliament has further added that the amendments to the Constitution were necessary for the people to acknowledge the merits and qualities of the one who “made a great service to [the] nation and [the] country. He does not need this but people [benefits from his] achievements” (2016).57

The Law, thus far available only in Russian and Tajik versions, is made up sixteen articles. Article 1 reflects Parliament’s statement quoted above. It designates Rahmon as the “symbol of the longevity of the Tajik sovereign state, of peace, of national unity” and the “guarantor of a stable development”. Article 3, states that the Leader of the Nation can participate, make recommendations and assist Parliament on “any important state and social issues, on internal and external affairs”. He is also granted a seat for life in Parliament and will be the “Representative of the public movement and national unity of Tajikistan”. Article 4 stipulates that prizes and official decorations will be established in his honour. There will be the “Leader of the Nation” state prize and decoration, approved beforehand by Rahmon himself. From now on, he will enjoy public prosecution immunity for life. According to Articles 5, 6, and 10, he, as well as his family, is entitled to social and health insurances, official housing accommodations and transportation and, according to Article 7, to all state services, security protection, as established by Article 8. Article 13 stipulates that he will benefit from a state pension equivalent to 80 per cent of his current salary. On cultural matters, article 11 states that “museums, a library and archives of the Founder of Peace and National Unity- the Leader of the Nation will be erected”, financed by the State budget (Article 14).

58 See http://www.prezident.tj/ru/taxonomy/term/5/951
The Law further engraves the name of Rahmon in Tajikistan’s history. According to the spirit of the Law, he embodies national independence, national unity. Its implications are many and of a different nature: in real terms, it signifies the affirmation of Rahmon as the autocratic leader. It demonstrates his uncontested grip on power. It suggests the further weakening of any semblance of substantive democratic political order, the subservience of the state’s structures, and the subordination of societal forces of whatever orientation.

b) Referendum on amendments to the Constitution, and the Law of the Leader

In addition to Parliament’s view of the pertinence of the Law, other institutions and public personalities have joined in support of the referendum, the Law of the Leader and of Rahmon. Judging from available sources, Tajik media does not convey views of a large social spectrum. Not hint whatsoever at what the people feel or think. The people are just represented. It has its spokespersons and, implicitly, it is assumed that they know best. The autocratic nature of the country is masked by an imagined narrative/vision of nation building: Tajikistan is a free and democratic country where the people are sovereign. It is therefore no accident that Shukurdzhon Zuhurov, Chairman of the Lower House of Parliament, asserts that the “referendum is folded in the flag of democracy and freedom such as in other countries.” (2016). He adds that the recognition of Rahmon as the Leader of the Nation is not contrary to Tajiks’ attachment to democratic values\(^59\).

Jamshed Nurmahamadzoda, Chairman of the National Bank of Tajikistan (TNB), and until last May former Finance deputy minister, backed the yes vote in the national referendum. He asked TNB cadres and employees to cast a “logic” vote. According to Khovar.tj, Nurmahamadzodo stresses that the “amendments [...] to the Constitution [...] aimed at a sustainable and stable development of society, further [...] democratization of public life, strengthening and improvement of the constitutional bases of state power and the development of the state language.”

The referendum is thus presented as leading towards greater democratization and consolidation of Tajikistan’s sovereignty.

Such laudatory and hardly objective portrayals of the president are not circumscribed to high state’s representatives: in December 2015 Rafika Musoeva, the Chairman of the Association of power engineers of Tajikistan, like other influential personalities, supports the constitutional amendments. In her view Rahmon is “the one who is able to take full responsibility for the fate of his people” and he “has proven himself as a real Leader […] with strongly marked will, strong principles, selflessly devoted to his chosen cause”\(^{61}\). Rahmon, she reminds, put an end to the civil war and made Tajikistan independent and sovereign, and with due regard for democratic principles has fostered sustainable economic development. Independence “was the dream of [our] ancestors”. Rahmon was capable of transforming this “dream into reality”. As Rahmon is the protector of Tajik lives, from Musoeva’s point of view, his new status is not “divorced from reality” as it is merely elevated and enshrined in law. It formalizes a status that has been “already approved in the world”.

In the publicity campaign in favour of the referendum and, therefore, of the yes vote, prominence was given also to people from academic circles. On May 3\(^{rd}\) 2016, *Khovar.tj* published an article by professor Makhbuba Kamolova who maintained that the referendum marked the “development of democratic institutions”\(^{62}\). It symbolizes “direct democracy” and concerns “the main issues related to the State and society”. Kamolova points out that the referendum is of “great importance for the modern Tajik Constitutionalism”. To give it greater credence he adds that it has been used by many “western democracies” and that it permits the direct “inclusion of mass population in the state management process”. It is obvious that she fails to mention that a referendum is not proof of greater democracy nor is it a democratic tool in itself, unless, as Dr. Maria Koinova, points out, “the rules of engagement are

---

61 See http://khovar.tj/eng/2015/12/glava-sogda-2016-god-v-oblasti-obyavlen-godom-zdorovogo-cheloveka/  
62 See http://khovar.tj/rus/2016/05/referendum-kak-institut-pryamogo-narodovlastiya-v-sisteme-tadzhikskoj-gosudarstvennosti/
negotiated between the stakeholders in advance” (2014). The approval of the constitutional amendments by Parliament in February 2016 and the referendum and the public support by representatives of public institutions and public personalities do not meet the criteria or the conditioned mentioned by Dr. Koinova. As it was foreseen, the changes were approved and the Law enacted, by the formal involvement of Tajik people and the unquestionable support of the state’s structures and its representatives, and the equally laudatory participation of public personalities.

At a different level, the speeches by the president, high officials and personalities suggest a sort of connecting bridge between what Rahmon thinks of the people and how those public figures view the Leader. Rahmon always refer to the Tajiks as noble and generous and, in turn, he is portrayed as devoted to the nation. In brief, the Leader and the people are in perpetual communion. He has done everything within his power and capabilities to improve Tajiks welfare, and the nation compensates such commitment by enshrining his patriotic virtues in the Law. This devotion to the Leader is very much projected in mass media, itself a reflection of the control that the government exercises upon it. Rahmon manages a double and contradictory discourse on the role of media, pluralism and freedom of the press. A subordinated mass media is in itself a clear sign of the Leader’s regime and of his until now efficacious power building.

Not surprisingly, Tajik media underlines also Rahmon’s presumed greatness. In Khovar.tj cultural section, most of the articles have to do with national identity matters. Avesta.tj, centres its coverage on Rahmon’s master piece, the Rogun dam. As Tajikistan is markedly autocratic, mass media is increasingly controlled, essentially therefore conveying official views. Contradictions are abundant: in 2006 Rahmon praises in front of the Parliament the “free activity of 8 political parties, 2700 NGOs, 262 newspapers, 81 magazines, 22 non-state TV and radio stations, and 9 news agencies is a clear sign of citizens’ rights and interests, different political approach.” Around this time, Laruelle and Peyrouse affirm that “the main

---

63 See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/06/08/referendums-a-legitimate-democratic-tool-or-a-mechanism-for-nationalist-co-optation/

64 See http://www.prezident.tj/en/node/10611
independent newspapers Ruzi Nav, Nerui Sukhan, were accused of defamation of the president and governmental representatives. [Rahmon] sees political debate as a challenge to his authority. Complot theories and fifth column put in danger state’s security, are arguments often used [by the government]” (2005, 39). Six year later, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Tajik press, Rahmon claimed that the “freedom of media is one of the most important achievements of independent Tajikistan” (2012). According to him, the excess of laudatory comments was one of the factors of the Soviet Union collapse. His presumed attachment to freedom of the press refers to a non-existent reality: In 2013 Reporters without Borders ranked Tajikistan 123 out of 177 in observance of freedom of the press. The worst year for media freedom is 2016: the country ranks 150 out of 180. Rahmon’s vision of the media changed rapidly too: he asserts that some people could use it to destabilize the country and “cast doubt on [Tajiks] national customs and traditions” (2013).

In any event, Rahmon seems to care little about the contradictions that his statements reflect. The primary sources cited show that, at one moment he professes his respect for freedom of opinion, and the next he warns that too much freedom may weaken tradition and values. In his speech to Parliament in 2013, Rahmon said that there was “an expansion of […] political pluralism”, and that it should be exercised “within the boundaries of [the law, for if not it could] undermine the stability of the country ”. Such advice is constantly given: the threat of “antipatriotic groups, domestic extremists and some interested foreign circles” appears and reappears in the president speeches (Rahmon, 2011). As recently as January 2016, in his annual address to Parliament, Rahmon declared that “the traitors of the Tajik nation and their foreign commanders have forgotten that the honourable people of independent Tajikistan will not allow anyone to overthrow their secure and peaceful life anymore with the help of provocation and intrigues like in the 1990s”. Aside for the inference to civil war, it is not at all clear whom does he refer to when he speaks of the rebels’ “foreign masters”.

66 See https://rsf.org/fr/tadjikistan
67 See http://president.tj/en/node/4325
68 See http://www.prezident.tj/en/node/10608
c) ‘Great Distractions’, performative legitimacy exercises

Rahmon’s government has striven to enhance and enrich Tajikistan’s national identity symbols. In this logic, traditional markers, national festivities, ancient and newly created ones, are used by the regime to remind Tajiks of their patriotic duties and to instil loyalty towards the Leader. His government has added celebrations to the civic calendar. They concern heroic figures, cultural personalities, traditional habits, dress, horticulture, and the like. The calendar celebration, or rather the year of… is, to say the least, colourful and plentiful. As mentioned before, Pannier calls these performative initiatives the “great distraction” (2016), instrumental to engrain patriotism and pride in the cultural Tajik heritage. It has a political function, and seems to be a modern version of the ancient Roman practice known as bread and circuses. Those activities deviate precious economic resources and distract people from political reflection. Attention is requested on the recurrent Rahmonian much cherished topics. In 2008 he justified those celebrations in the following manner:

“without any exaggeration, these great national and state celebrations will assist in developing and strengthening the process of self-consciousness, self-determination, national unity, strong feelings of patriotism by each citizen of beloved Tajikistan. It will strengthen the love to the ancient country and preserve the poetic language of Rudaki, and the bounds between the past and today are a marker that guide us to the way of new achievements and progress”.  

A sample of those the year of, celebrations can be categorized as follows:

**National figures and values**

- 2008 was the “year of the Tajik language”, along with the “1150th anniversary of the King of poets- Rudaki”. Rudaki represents the beauty, the originality and immortality of the Tajik language. Language became a main constituent and unifying element in nation building. Tajik language is the “symbol of nationhood, national identity and guarantor of the existence of the world-famous culture and the pride of all Tajik people.” (Rahmon, 2013)

---


70 Ibid

71 See http://president.tj/en/node/8141
2009 marked the “Jubilee year of the Great Imam Abu Hanifa”, the founder of Hanafism, an Islamic school of thought, and above all, a pillar of statehood. In 2015 Abu Hanifa’s 1310th anniversary was again celebrated. 

2003-2015, water entered the civic calendar: with the “International Year of Fresh Water” in 2003; then from 2005 it was the turn of the “International Decade for Action ‘Water for Life’”; and in 2013, the “International Year of Water Cooperation”. They all have become national celebrations.

2015, was the turn of the “Year of the Family”.

2015 the regime celebrated the 700 anniversary of the Philosopher Mir Said Ali Hamadani. He “played an important role in the expansion of the national sense of responsibility, self-identification and self-consciousness […]” (Rahmon, 2016).

The regime has undertaken other initiatives aimed at engraining national identity consciousness and, in passing, distancing the country from markers linked to the Soviet period. They also strive to contain Islam’s religious and cultural influence. Again, language comes in handy:

From 2016, a sort of back to the source linguistic initiatives has been introduced. These policies centre on renaming geographical places (cities and districts) which at present bear Soviet-Russian, Arab and Turkic names. They will be given others with Persian or Tajik connotations (Najbullah, 2016).

Also from 2016, those ‘back to the source initiatives’, apply to people: Arabic-like names will be forbidden, instead ‘original’ Tajik-Persian names should be given to new-borns, to prevent further divisions in Tajik society, according to the Justice Minister. The state Committee for Language and Terminology has published a list of 4000 ‘true’ Tajik names. In 2007, Rahmon himself dropped the Russian suffix ov.

---

72 See 2008 and 2015 Independence speeches
73 See the 2015 speech to Parliament
74 See http://www.prezident.tj/en/node/10608
75 See http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-ban-arabic-names-marriage-between-cousins/27486012.html]
In a more prosaic line, Rahmon’s regime has established other commemorations, such as:

- The “day of wrestlers”, followed by “the day of horse riders” and the “day of flowers and planting.” (BBC, 2016) and part and parcel of that joyful approach to Tajikness, there is the annual holiday of Honey and Melon. These products are proudly part of the Tajik folklore (ASIA-Plus, 2015). The melon is even symbolized in the newly 43 meters high National Tea House, whose architecture recreates the shape of the fruit.

- A different type of great distractors concern Rahmon’s megalomaniac and construction of ever taller, grandiose and expensive public sites: the flagpole (2011); the national library (2012); the National Museum (2013); the National Theatre (2013); the National teahouse (2014) (Eurasianet.org, 2015).

These ‘great distractions’ are codified by the state institutions and may be seen as part of the ideological platform that Rahmon has articulated throughout his long stay in power. According to Salimov, in this endeavour the Academy of Sciences has been fundamental. It has been central in the regime’s efforts to “counterbalance propaganda hostile to Tajikistan” (2015). Presumably, the Academy has presented a “more accurate and objective information [for instance on the civil war] compared to other sources” (Salimov, 2015). Additionally, in his efforts to strengthen nation and national Rahmon emphasizes the role to be played by the young generations:

**On youth and education**

- In 2012 on the occasion of the National Unity day, he said that “it is of critical importance for this generation to deeply realize the vital role of national unity in building a democratic and fair society, as well as in strengthening the pillars of the independence of our beloved Motherland”

- In his speech on National Unity, in 2015 he declared that: “the wisdom of our ancestors must become your life credo […] In this regard, primary importance

---

77 See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2199
must be given to the propaganda of the essence of modern national state and statehood, respect for the supremacy of law, defence of the interests of Government and People of Tajikistan, values of the national unity, peace and political stability, defence of values and achievements of the State Independence, as well as prevention of involvement in any kind of radical groups and movements.”

- 2016 has been declared the Tajik youth Day, and in March-April took place the festival “Radiance of Youth”, (Khovar.tj).

- Rahmon himself is becoming a cult object: in February 2016 “a contest for the best essays in praise of the “heroic” rule of Rahmon Emomali”, was organized by the governmental Youth affairs committee, the theme simply was: “Young People: Followers of the Leader of the Nation” (AFP, 2016).

The regime is becoming increasingly autocratic, as illustrated by the great distractions mentioned above including the contest having Rahmon as the main topic. Higher education is being permeated also by this cult of personality tendency. For instance, the Director of the Law Faculty at the National University of Tajikistan (NUT), insists that “the ‘Children of the Nation’, the youth must respect and remember the ‘Father of the nation’ who saved the nation from imploding […] fortunately they did not suffer from the civil war, [and thus] need to know that the Leader of the nation Emomali Rahmon has ended this war.” (Fergananews.com, 2016). The underlying message is that freedoms and pluralism impinge upon social harmony, and that peace and stability are guaranteed by a single party system and a strong leader (Roche, 2013, 69). A clear example of coerciveness, applied by educational institutions, is that from 2016 students at some faculties of the NUT have to enrol in a course on “Emomali Rahmon - the architect of the new Tajik state”. History students already take courses on Rahmon’s masterpiece “The Tajiks in the Mirror of History”. Fergananews.com details that the course consists of 32 hours of theory and 32 of practical work. The course covers the “Rahmon period” only. Rahmon stresses youth’s responsibility towards the nation. Again on the 2015 National Unity speech, he reminded them that:

---

78 See http://president.tj/en/node/9242
The wisdom of our ancestors must become your life credo [...] primary importance must be given to [...] the essence of modern national state and statehood, respect for the supremacy of law, defence of interests of Government and People of Tajikistan, values of the national unity, peace and political stability, defence of values and achievements of the State Independence, as well as prevention of involvement in any kind of radical groups and movements.\footnote{80}{See http://president.tj/en/node/9242}

In what it concerns the role of women in society, Rahmon uses also paternalistic figures of speech when he says that they symbolize the Motherland. Official celebrations have suffered changes: from Women’s day, to Mothers’ day. He is hyperbolic when referring to women’s traits: “experienced”, “successful”, “great, “respectful” “life-givers”\footnote{81}{See the speech for the Mother’s day (2016) http://www.president.tj/ru/node/10859}. They are also “guardians of the Tajik language” (Thibault, 2016, 6). Rahmon is at once the \textit{Leader} and the \textit{Father of the Nation}, the president of a demographically disfigured country, where important segments of the “noble and generous” Tajiks must emigrate to seek a better life, resulting in family fractures (La Roche, 2016, 218).

Each celebration and what it represents seeks to reinforce Rahmon’s vision and the narratives that he has been constructing over time. Through its recurrence, he makes every effort to anchor them in the people’s imaginary. In the process he tries to cement further his grip on power. In this regard, and so as to reduce Islam’s importance Rahmon underlines Tajikistan’s Persian roots embodied in Navruz celebration and in his 2010 speech has gone as far as saying that “the ancient holiday of Navruz marks the beginning of our rich history and as valuable heritage is closely intertwined with our national culture”\footnote{82}{See http://www.president.tj/en/node/2567}. This year he referred to it as a stability and peace instrument\footnote{83}{See http://www.president.tj/en/node/10965}. In his recurrent laudatory language Rahmon places Navruz as an indisputable landmark of Tajikistan’s Aryan and Persian roots. It has even been advanced, on Navruz Day in 2016, that “if once again we return to history and unite all the Aryan state, then the one who is worthy of Jamshid’s throne is the President of Tajikistan” (\textit{Khovar.tj}, 2016). Each of these events allows Rahmon to underline the value of national unity, and as this year marks the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of
Tajikistan’s independence, mass media, are particularly active in the promotion of such a “great and sacred national holiday”. In language much similar to that of the president, *Khovar.tj* writes that:

> “the nation forces each of us to work for the sake of prosperity, stability of the country, to be always vigilant for the protection of the national and state interests in order to adequately fulfil [the] duty before the Motherland and the people of Tajikistan” (2016)\(^6^4\).

The focus and the goals remain the same “peace”, “stability” and “the salvation of [the] national statehood from disappearance”. In a style much similar to that employed by Rahmon, *Khovar.tj* wrote that Independence celebrations honour the “history and creative activities for the sake of the present and future destiny of [the] beloved Motherland” (*Khovar.tj*, 2016). This year several events have been organised to highlight its importance and the role played by Rahmon as the peace architect. According to *Khovar.tj* (2016), an encyclopaedia on Tajik culture has been just published. It aims to be a “mirror of sacred values of the Tajik nation”, and it consists of several volumes: the first one “reveals the ancestral sacred stories and the birth of Tajik culture”. The following volumes will depict the immaterial Tajik culture such as “Navruz”, “the national clothes”, “the children’s games”, “the National Social celebrations”. The encyclopaedia completes Rahmon’s book on Tajikistan’s history, “Tajiks in the mirror of History”\(^6^5\).

Larger than life, public works strive to match Rahmon’s megalomaniac propensity. Everything seems to be en route to make of him a living narrative: a garden of 160 hectares, named the Leader of the Nation, preceded the fruit garden marking the twenty-five years of sovereign Tajikistan\(^6^6\). Some villages, and neighbourhoods were renamed Rahmonobod and his name is anchored throughout Tajikistan’s landscape. An ever-loving motherland’s son, he is depicted in a stone mosaic, “sitting beside his mother, hands cupped in supplication” (Rickleton, 2016). These monuments are at

---


\(^{66}\) See http://khovar.tj/rus/2016/02/zakladka-sada-25-letie-nezavisimosti-tadzhikistana/
Tajiks’ requests to anchor the figure of the leader in Tajikistan (*Fergananews.com*, 2016).

In that logic of the great distractions, the underlying intention would be to move people’s attention away from political reflection, and to anchor them on the Leader’s narratives. It is of course a top-down approach in which public institutions, high officials, noteworthy personalities participate, interpreting the will and acting as spokespersons of the noble and generous Tajik people. The opposition is, for all practical purpose irrelevant and almost non-existent, erased from Tajikistan’s recent history. The Leader is loved and cherished and as soon as he appears in one his many official visits, locals bow down showing respect and love, women queue for hours to get a small space on the traditional carpet where Rahmon would walk (*Fergananews.com*, 2016).

In the end, as Matveeva pointedly remarks “all of these examples portend to how symbols and discursive narratives are used to aid regime legitimation”[^1]. Put also in a different manner, as Isaacs and Polese underline, “without recourse to a genuine democratic plebiscite, Central Asian regimes have often resorted to grandiose public events, discourses, and symbols to justify their rule and the centrality of their leadership to state sovereignty, prosperity, and survival” (2015, 374).

[^1]: In (Isaacs and Polese, 2015, 374)
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The thesis’ development has permitted to outline the following results related to the three premises highlighted in the introduction:

Rahmon has succeeded in consolidating his grip on power and in maintaining the country from falling apart. As national identity narratives have been a top-down enterprise, in the absence of Tajik non-official primary sources, it cannot be asserted that his apparent success results from the efficacy of his nation building efforts.

Viewed from the outside, Rahmon’s narratives anchored on ancient roots, twenty-five years after independence, are a still ongoing process. His hammering on the same topics would suggest that they have not been quite well engrained. The ancient-modern narrative, Rogun dam, is visibly still an unaccomplished endeavour. It is not possible to clearly determine the degree of identification with those narratives, Rogun dam included.

As Rahmon has consolidated his grip on power, recent political developments (the constitutional referendum, and the Law on the Leader, and the numerous great distractions or performative initiatives) demonstrate that Rahmon has become a narrative of his own, and that formally and legally he is the embodiment of national identity and values.

Put differently, the thesis has focused on Rahmon’s vision of a nation. In its treatment it has sought to answer the research question: How have Tajikistan’s nation building narratives and state structures rendered Rahmon the symbol of national unity? The research undertaken allows me to maintain that the narratives and, particularly the role of pubic structures haven been instrumental in making Rahmon the incarnation of Tajikistan’s cohesiveness and values.

It becomes clear that throughout the last twenty-five years Rahmon has striven to instil a sense of collective belonging with a rich millenary past. He has unearthed Tajikistan Aryan roots, highlighted Tajiks linkages with Zoroastrianism and with the
Samanids, and insisted on their linguistic distinctiveness. He has underline how Islam itself benefitted from Tajiks’ traits, a resilient yet generous and peace-loving people.

These are in brief, the discursive elements underlining Rahmon’s ongoing identity construction efforts. It is that which is also at the base of his most ambitious undergoing water project: Roghun, a symbol of national greatness and a most useful tool for economic development. Judging from Rahmon’s speeches those themes appear like a mantra, as recurrent as the performative initiatives referred above. However, as the country is increasingly hermetic, there is no reliable way of finding out how those topics connect with Tajiks nor is it possible to know what kinds of connections they make between Tajikistan’s presumed past greatness and the present. Additionally, given Rahmon’s continuing efforts, nation and national identity consolidation appear to be a still unattained goal, a permanent work in progress and, clearly, a top-down initiative.

The thesis has sought to underline and expand upon a not much explored angle in Tajikistan’s nation building narratives: the gradual and effective making of Rahmon as a national unity symbol. I believe it is worthwhile to broaden on this particular subject and, of special importance, on Rahmon and Rahmon’s extended family, as there are clear signs that a sort of Rahmonian dynasty is the making. It would be equally interesting to undertake further research on existing internal political and economic power holders and the likelihood they may represent a real challenge to Rahmon’s authority.

A highly promising research field concerns the extreme dependency on Russia as Tajik labour absorber, a harsh reality that contradicts Rahmon’s efforts to distance Tajikistan from its Soviet linkages, never alluded to in the one-sided narratives on nation building.
Bibliography


