

Assuaging Ethnic Factionalism Dagestan's Lessons for Post-Taliban Settlement in Afghanistan

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Studies of post-conflict settlement have shown that political decentralization rarely eliminates ethnopolitical violence. Yet, some form of decentralization often has to be used as a confidence building mechanism in the initial phases of rebuilding war-torn states. This challenge—balancing between central authority and group interests—is particularly acute in ethnically fragmented societies with a history of weak government. Under collapse of governance, ethnic identity becomes a powerful and sometimes the principal mobilizing force in pursuit of political and economic interests, increasing the likelihood of interethnic factionalism, rivalry, tensions, and violence. It is not surprising therefore that the United States and international organizations have pushed for power sharing and some form of federal or confederate institutions for a post-Taliban transitional government in Afghanistan following the military victories of the Northern Alliance and the U.S.-led international coalition in late 2001.

Parts of post-Soviet Russia—and especially Dagestan—have faced similar, although not as drastic—challenges of ethnic factionalism under political transitions in the 1990s. Successful avoidance of mass violence in this part of the North Caucasus, despite its proximity to Chechnya, where Russia waged two violent wars in the 1990s, as well as to violent conflicts in Georgia and Azerbaijan, suggests that Dagestan's experience could offer valuable lessons for the post-Taliban settlement in Afghanistan.

Why Dagestan Matters

Both Afghanistan and Dagestan are among some of the world's most ethnically, linguistically, and religiously complex and heterogeneous societies. In neither society does one ethnic group comprise more than half of the population, but in each society one ethnic group—the Pashtuns in Afghanistan (38 percent) and the Avars in Dagestan (27 percent)—is significantly larger than others. Afghanistan's principal languages are Pashtu (35 percent), Persian (Dari) (50 percent), and Turkic (11 percent), whereas Dagestan's ethnic groups speak distinct and for the most part mutually incomprehensible languages with Russian serving as the lingua franca. Both societies are predominantly Sunni Muslim, although the level of religious practice and commitment to

Islam is lower among the Dagestanis, as a result of decades of Soviet rule. In both societies, some of the Muslims are Shiites, although their proportion in Dagestan is lower. Dagestanis recognize three religious groups: Sunni Muslims are known as simply “Muslims;” Shiite Muslims are known as “Kadzhar;” and the Christians as “Urus,” or Russian.

Across Dagestan the collapse of communism quickly translated into lawlessness and sporadic violence. A colleague in Makhachkala recounted stories of armed bodyguards emerging from black Mercedes and, with total impunity, beating up policemen who dared to stop their cars for speeding. During my 1997 visit a mixed assortment of guards toting Kalashnikov submachine guns heavily patrolled the Makhachkala airport. Some wore the Russian interior ministry and its special operations forces (OMON) uniforms; others wore jeans, sweaters, and sneakers. The same assortment of guards kept watch at major intersections in downtown Makhachkala. At night, gunshots and submachine gun exchanges could be heard outside the city. Compounding insecurity “on the ground,” as Anna Matveeva of the London-based International Alert noted in 1997, was the impression that “relations inside the elite and the decisionmaking process are opaque, giving rise to... an increased reliance on informal ethnic networks.”

Jockeying for power and a share of increasingly scarce resources and facing rising grievances from a population that was rapidly becoming impoverished (in the late 1990s the average salary of Dagestanis was only one-third of the Russian Federation average, and unemployment reached 80 percent in rural mountainous areas), the leaders of Dagestan’s ethnic groups in the early 1990s formed political movements to mobilize “the ethnic factor” in support of their claims to status and resource sharing. Given easy access to firearms and a lack of government capacity in Moscow or in Makhachkala to suppress potentially violent expressions of interethnic grievances, predictions of instability and internal armed conflict in Dagestan could not be easily dismissed. And yet, to this day, Dagestan has survived in peace despite spillovers of violence from neighboring Chechnya; despite confrontations over land ownership, especially between Avars and immigrant returnee Chechens; despite unrest in Makhachkala in May 1998 during which Kalashnikov-armed men loyal to the leaders of the Lak ethnic movement temporarily took over the government headquarters; and despite predictions by some Russian experts that Moscow’s military operations in Chechnya would engender a violent Islamic fundamentalist backlash in Dagestan.

Dagestan’s Conflict-Preventive Institutions

In contrast to Afghanistan, in Dagestan a system of government institutions, partly inherited from the Soviet era and designed not only to appease but also to forestall ethnopolitical grievances, constrained ethnic and political mobilization. These institutions gave each of Dagestan’s principal ethnic groups a share of political power while also making access to government by these ethnic groups contingent on intergroup cooperation rather than on ethnic mobilization. In this manner, Dagestan’s political institutions reduced both interethnic grievances and the political utility of interethnic outbidding. The “rules of the game” included:

- Referenda: Referenda on government institutions—held in 1992 and 1993—signaled which arrangements would be most likely to bridge Dagestan’s ethnic divides, at least in the short term. Although not without shortcomings, the referenda provided insurance in the form of a popular mandate against inevitable mistakes in institution building. Based on the referenda, the Constitutional Assembly adopted Dagestan’s constitution on July 26, 1994. Most

significantly, the referenda offset possible claims of illegitimacy of indirect, four-tier election and rotation among major ethnic groups of Dagestan's chief executive (chairman of the State Council), thus diffusing rivalries among Dagestan's ethnic political movements that were likely to erupt in anticipation of direct presidential election contests. For this reason, the rotating chief executive system that was discredited in the former Yugoslavia—where Communist Party mandate instituted it—has proved viable in Dagestan, where popular vote instituted it.

- Cross-Ethnic Checks and Balances: The 1994 Dagestan constitution institutionalized a separation of governmental powers into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while providing each major ethnic group the means to check the actions of other ethnic groups both within and across these branches of government, especially with regard to the executive and the legislature. Several unique mechanisms combining elements of the Madisonian separation of powers and ethnic-based proportional representation were implemented:
 - Dagestan's 14 major indigenous ethnic groups, plus a representative of ethnic Russians, have representatives on the chief executive body, the State Council.
 - Representatives of Dagestan's three largest ethnic groups hold the three most important executive and legislative positions in government.
 - The legislative assembly—representative of Dagestan's ethnic mix—elects the State Council. Those candidates who receive support across ethnic lines stand a better chance of getting elected than candidates of a single group. For that reason, leaders of ethnic nationalist movements in Dagestan failed to get elected to the State Council.
 - A system of packet replacement of the Cabinet of Ministers ensures ethnic parity and preempts the emergence of ethnic-based ministerial sinecures. Packet replacement requires a wholesale reshuffle of the cabinet whenever a minister is replaced.
 - Any ethnic group (national community) has the right to demand a two-thirds majority vote on legislation affecting “changes to the current administrative-territorial arrangements, and likewise to the demographic, linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural environment of the peoples of Dagestan” if a deputy or a group of deputies representing this group in Dagestan's legislative assembly disagrees with the bill.
- Cross-Ethnic Voting: Dagestan's complex system of election to the legislative assembly (that then elects the State Council that, in turn, elects the chairman, or chief executive) seeks to both ensure ethnic parity among Dagestan's largest groups and to give a voice in the legislature to minority ethnic groups. Toward these ends:
 - Dagestan's 121 electoral districts were divided into 64 “national electoral districts” located primarily in urban and ethnically heterogeneous areas and 57 “ordinary” electoral districts. In “national electoral districts” only candidates representing a single ethnic group fixed for each district that is not a majority group can run for office (hence, a Dargin district, a Lezgin district, etc.). Delineation of these districts—itsself a complicated, opaque, and potentially contentious process—was based on arrangements inherited from the Communist era and proceeded through informal multilateral bargaining between ethnic group representatives and Dagestan's Electoral Commission.

- The ethnic composition of these 64 “national electoral districts” served to enhance ethnic parity, mostly through underrepresentation of the majority Avar group. In the late 1990s, 64 of Dagestan’s 121 ethnic districts were Avar, 12 Kumyk, 10 Russian, 7 Dargin, 5 Tabassaran, 5 Azeri, 4 Lezgin, 4 Chechen, 3 Lak, and 2 Tat (“Mountain Jews”). In this system, candidates who organize and campaign across ethnic lines are more likely to succeed than candidates who would emphasize mobilization along ethnic divides.
- The 57 remaining electoral districts were located in mountainous areas with predominantly monoethnic populations representing indigenous Dagestani minorities who are thus assured of representation in parliament, thereby obviating the need to resort formally to proportional representation.
- Cross-Ethnic Integration and Mediation: In addition to going out of their way to promote ethnic parity in government institutions, Dagestan’s leaders took measures to strengthen a civic Dagestani identity acceptable across ethnic divides. Several strategies stand out:
 - Dagestan’s political elites have promoted political parties that espouse ideologies conducive to ethnic integration to counterbalance ethnic nationalist movements that emerged and gained wide popular support in the early 1990s. In the late 1990s, three such moderate parties played the leading role on Dagestan’s political scene—the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Dagestani People’s Reform Party (founded by the influential mayor of Makhachkala, Said Amirov), and the Islamic Party of Dagestan.
 - Dagestan’s leaders also tapped into the cross-ethnic appeal of traditional Sunni Islam by working with the Islamic Party, the Muslim Society, the Union of Muslims of Russia, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan, and with the Tariqat Sufi orders. Islamic organizations have been used to mediate disputes between different ethnic groups. With the mainstream traditional Islamic organizations coopted into Dagestan’s political process, the fundamentalist and puritanical groups such as Wahhabis that emerged after the Soviet collapse became politically marginalized by default, despite increased influence in poor mountainous villages.
 - Political leaders in Dagestan have developed effective and successful repertoires of formal and informal mediation techniques to address emergent interethnic quarrels. Whenever quarrels emerged that threatened violent confrontation, the Dagestani government identified local leaders on all sides of the dispute regardless of whether they held official positions or not. The government then built “rapid reaction” teams featuring Dagestani government officials, local spokesmen, and “influential people” (opinion leaders) that would negotiate with each of the ethnic groups involved in a dispute. The opinion leaders sometimes included federal politicians and Islamic leaders. Negotiations were held in private and then leaders of disputing parties used their influence within groups to make publicly acceptable settlements.
 - The Dagestani government actively promoted cultural expression of its diverse ethnic groups. The republic established a ministry of nationalities that funded six national theaters sharing three large concert-hall style buildings in Makhachkala and local cultural centers on a lesser scale in various counties. In the late 1990s, the ministry financed radio stations broadcasting in 11 languages, television stations broadcasting

- in nine languages, newspapers in 11 languages, and an edition of a women's magazine in multiple indigenous languages.
- Some of Dagestan's diverse ethnic communities have historically relied on an informal network of *kunaki* to prevent conflicts. Two male individuals representing different ethnic groups would become *kunaki* by swearing to treat one another like brothers. They then cut their wrists and hold them together to let their blood mix. Subsequently, *kunaki* agree to host in their homes members of the other ethnic group or clan whenever they visit them and to act as mediators between the guests and one's own group. The institution of *kunaki* thus creates powerful informal cross-ethnic bonds through assumed kinship and reciprocity. *Kunaki* are thus brothers, diplomats, and hostages merged into one.

Policy Implications

None of the institutions described above has been perfect and some arrangements engendered interethnic conflict where they were supposed to prevent it. Moreover, the system of rotating the chairmanship of the chief executives has yet to produce a rotation. Politicians in Dagestan fear that an ethnic Avar will have to replace the incumbent Dargin, putting the majority ethnic group in charge of the most powerful political office and thus upsetting a complex web of institutions that provides for ethnic parity. Yet, given Dagestan's political, social, and economic challenges in the 1990s, the capacity of these institutions to maintain general stability is remarkable. Although it will not apply wholesale in other contexts, the Dagestani model does offer a sophisticated toolkit of policy repertoires for nation building in war-torn ethnically factionalized societies such as that of Afghanistan.

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