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Polygamy in Tajikistan: ideological contortions and economic realities

In sharp contrast to the tsarist authorities who had chosen not to tamper with existing sociocultural structures in Central Asia, the Soviet regime imposed an active policy of "cultural modernization," notably by the prohibition of certain "crimes based on customs." Among these, polygamy was considered to incarnate female submission in Central Asia; its prohibition was seen as advance for the rights of women, whom it was hoped would participate fully in the Soviet society that was being constructed. After the dissolution of the USSR and the independence of Tajikistan, polygamy – though still prohibited by law – made a reappearance to the point where it is now a common phenomenon. Two explanatory factors have emerged from our analysis. The first is the demographic imbalance due to work-related emigration of young Tajik men, particularly to Russia. This imbalance was accentuated in the case of Tajikistan by the civil war that affected the country in the 1990s. The second is the fact that polygamy is widely justified as a type of social protection that has become necessary since the dismantling of the safety nets in force during the Soviet era (employment, health, housing, education, pensions, etc.) - a type of social protection that some people, including the more religious, are quick to describe as a religious "good deed." Be that as it may, there are high risks faced by women who have not been officially married in a state-sanctioned ceremony. If it comes to a divorce, they have no rights and no recourse in the courts. It is often such women whom one encounters in crisis centres. Yet polygamous men are hardly ever prosecuted. What explains the current governmental tolerance for this activity which is nonetheless prohibited by law? Is it simply a matter of weak state apparatus (lack of means to apply the law) or is this non-intervention intentional? What are the socio-economic implications of this tolerance and to what extent does it reflect social transformations at work in the Tajik society? If marriage is truly a ritual that unites political interests and local practices, what does polygamy's reappearance tell us about relations between the authorities and the population, and between the will to create a national identity and to affirm Muslim "traditions?" Can one analyse polygamy as a manipulation of norms at local level, a "re-traditionalization" that challenges the monopoly of identity assigned to the state? In what way does it reveal current social tensions? After a historical section tracing the history of polygamy since the Russian conquest of Central Asia, and a second section presenting data collected in field studies carried out in Tajikistan, these are the questions covered in our paper.

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