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Freedom in the World 2010 - Tajikistan

Capital: Dushanbe

Population: 7,300,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

President Emomali Rahmon continued to tighten controls over religious practice in 2009. The promotion of two of Rahmon's children to government posts exposed increasing nepotism within his regime. The economy remained stalled as remittances from Tajiks working abroad fell, and an audit revealed \$1 billion in irregularities at the National Bank.

Former Communist Party leader Rakhmon Nabiyeu was elected president of Tajikistan after the country declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Long-simmering, clan-based tensions, combined with various anti-Communist and Islamist movements, soon plunged the country into a five-year civil war. In September 1992, Communist hard-liners forced Nabiyeu's resignation; he was replaced later that year by Emomali Rakhmonov, a leading Communist Party member.

Rakhmonov was elected president in November 1994, after most opposition candidates either boycotted or were prevented from competing in the poll. Similarly, progovernment candidates won the 1995 parliamentary elections amid a boycott by the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a coalition of secular and Islamic groups that had emerged as the main force fighting against Rakhmonov's government.

Following a December 1996 ceasefire, Rakhmonov and UTO leader Said Abdullo Nuri signed a formal peace agreement in 1997. The accord called for the merging of opposition forces into the regular army, granted an amnesty for UTO members, provided for the UTO to be allotted 30 percent of senior government posts, and established a 26-member National Reconciliation Commission, with seats evenly divided between the government and the UTO.

A September 1999 referendum that permitted the formation of religion-based political parties paved the way for the legal operation of the Islamic opposition, including the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). The referendum also extended the president's term from five to seven years. In November, Rakhmonov was reelected with a reported 97

percent of the vote in a poll that was criticized by international observers for widespread irregularities.

In February 2000 parliamentary elections, Rakhmonov's People's Democratic Party (PDP) received nearly 65 percent of the vote. Although the participation of six parties provided some political pluralism, a joint monitoring mission by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations cited serious problems.

After the elections, the National Reconciliation Commission was formally disbanded, and a UN observer mission withdrew in May 2000. However, important provisions of the peace accord remained unimplemented, with demobilization of opposition factions incomplete and the government failing to meet the 30 percent quota for UTO members in senior government posts.

A 2003 constitutional referendum cleared a path for Rakhmonov to remain in office until 2020. The PDP easily won 2005 parliamentary elections, taking 52 of 63 seats in the lower house. OSCE monitors concluded that "despite some improvement over previous elections, large-scale irregularities were evident." In the run-up to the polls, a number of Rakhmonov's prominent former allies were jailed, often on dubious charges.

Also in 2005, Russian border guards who had long patrolled the frontier with Afghanistan completed their withdrawal. However, a Russian army division that had been in place since the Soviet period maintained its permanent presence in the country.

Rakhmonov won the November 2006 presidential election with more than 70 percent of the vote, although the OSCE pointed in its report to lackluster campaigning and a general absence of real competition. The president broadened his influence to the cultural sphere in 2007, de-Russifying his surname to "Rahmon" in March and signing legislation in May to establish spending limits on birthday and wedding celebrations.

The severe winter between 2007 and 2008 brought power outages and demonstrations; in February 2008, the United Nations appealed for \$25 million in emergency assistance for the country to stave off famine. Economic hardships continued in 2009 amid falling remittances from workers in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Tajikistan's generally good relations with Russia suffered somewhat after an October 2009 Tajik law stripped the Russian language of its status as the language of interethnic communication. Ties with the United States warmed as Tajikistan agreed to allow the overland transport of non-military supplies to support U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's late 2009 decision to withdraw from the unified Central Asian power grid amid tension with Tajikistan over water usage raised the prospect of severe electricity shortages in Tajikistan.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Tajikistan is not an electoral democracy. The 1994 constitution provides for a strong, directly elected president who enjoys broad authority to appoint and dismiss officials. A full-time, bicameral parliament was created in 1999, while amendments in 2003 allowed current president Emomali Rahmon to serve two additional seven-year terms beyond the 2006 election. In the Assembly of Representatives (lower chamber), 63 members are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms. In the 33-seat National Assembly (upper chamber), 25 members are chosen by local assemblies, and 8 are appointed by the president, all for five-year terms. Elections are neither free nor fair.

Patronage networks and regional affiliations are central to political life, with officials from the president's native Kulyob region dominant in government. In 2009, Rahmon's daughter Ozoda was appointed deputy foreign minister, while his son became deputy head of the Youth Union.

Rahmon's PDP is the ruling political party. Secular opposition parties are weak. The August 2006 death of the IRP's widely respected leader, Said Abdullo Nuri, further reduced the limited influence of the only legal religion-based party in Central Asia.

Corruption is reportedly pervasive. Members of the president's family allegedly maintain extensive business interests. In 2008, the National Bank revealed that it falsified its reserves to secure a \$48 million loan from the International Monetary Fund. An April 2009 audit by Ernst & Young revealed \$1 billion in irregularities in the National Bank's accounting, though it remains unclear whether these revelations sparked any meaningful reform. Tajikistan was ranked 158 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and the press, independent journalists face harassment and intimidation, and the penal code criminalizes defamation. The government controls most printing presses, newsprint supplies, and broadcasting facilities, leaving little room for independent news and analysis. Most television stations are state owned or only nominally independent, and the process of obtaining broadcast licenses is cumbersome. In August 2007, the president signed legislation that criminalized libel on the internet and allowed courts to sentence journalists to up to two years in prison for libel in print publications. In April 2009, Rahmon warned that "enemies" were using the internet to undermine his rule and urged mobilization against them.

The government has imposed increasing restrictions on religion in recent years in this predominantly Muslim country. In 2005, the minister of education banned the wearing of the *hijab* (headscarf) in schools and higher educational institutions. In 2007, the authorities shut down large numbers of unauthorized mosques and instituted more restrictive rules for licensing religious leaders. In January 2009, the Supreme Court banned Salafi Islam, a conservative movement. In March, a new law limited religious rituals to state-approved venues and banned the promotion of any religion except traditional Hanafi Islam. Reports indicate that conservative religiosity is on the rise despite official restrictions.

The government at times limits freedoms of assembly and association. Local government approval is required to hold public demonstrations, and officials reportedly refuse to grant permission in virtually all cases, rendering gatherings illegal. All nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the Ministry of Justice. Citizens have the legal right to form and join trade unions and to bargain collectively, but trade unions are largely subservient to the authorities and indifferent to workers' interests.

The judiciary lacks independence. Many judges are poorly trained and inexperienced, and bribery is reportedly widespread. Police often conduct arbitrary arrests and beat detainees to extract confessions. Conditions in prisons – which are overcrowded and disease-ridden – are often life-threatening. In June 2009, Deputy Justice Minister Rustam Mengliyev called the penitentiary system "closed," and in August the authorities restricted visits by international representatives.

Tajikistan is a major conduit for the smuggling of narcotics from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. A side effect has been an increase in drug addiction within Tajikistan, as well as a rise in the number of cases of HIV/AIDS.

In April 2008, Dushanbe Mayor Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev asked city residents to "donate" money from their salaries to fund the Roghun hydropower plant, a move critics described as state-sponsored extortion (although it was unclear how many people were affected). President Rahmon made a similar call in December 2009.

Sexual harassment, traditional discrimination, and violence against women, including spousal abuse, are reportedly common, but cases are rarely investigated. Reports indicate that women sometimes face societal pressure to wear headscarves, even though official policy discourages the practice. A November 2009 report by Amnesty International called domestic violence in Tajikistan "widespread." Despite some

government efforts to address human trafficking, Tajikistan remains a source and transit country for persons trafficked for prostitution. Child labor, particularly on cotton farms, also remains a problem.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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