

Title	World Report 2011 - Tajikistan
Publisher	Human Rights Watch
Country	Tajikistan
Publication Date	24 January 2011
Cite as	Human Rights Watch, <i>World Report 2011 - Tajikistan</i> , 24 January 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d3e80260.html [accessed 24 February 2011]



World Report 2011 - Tajikistan

Events of 2010

Despite a few small positive steps, Tajik authorities continue to violate rights affecting areas ranging from elections and media freedoms to religious liberty and women's rights.

In February 2010 Tajikistan held parliamentary elections that were marked by fraud, resulting in the ruling party's victory by an overwhelming margin and the further strengthening of President Emomali Rahmon's nearly 20-year rule. The authorities continued suppression of the press, especially in the run-up to the election. The government began enforcing a repressive law that tightens state control over religious activity. Domestic violence against women remains rampant in Tajik society. The judiciary is neither independent nor effective.

In September 2010, Islamist militants attacked a convoy of government troops in the Rasht Valley, killing between 25 and 40 soldiers, and scattered clashes continued through October. The troops had been sent to track down militants who had escaped from a Dushanbe prison in August and were believed to have fled into the valley. The violence marks the first major clash in a decade between government and insurgent forces, giving rise to concerns about creeping instability in Tajikistan, especially in light of the war in neighboring Afghanistan.

Justice System

A report published in March 2010 by the Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, a Tajik nongovernmental organization, revealed a judicial system with little advance notification of hearings, patchy explanations of process and rights, erratic access to interpreters, and efforts by judges to exclude observers.

The politicization of the Tajik justice system was underscored by the treatment of Nematillo Botakozuev, a Kyrgyz human rights activist who had sought asylum in Tajikistan. Botakozuev disappeared in late February 2010; his relatives only learned one month later that he was in the custody of the Tajik police for allegedly lacking identification. He was held without access to communications or a lawyer. When a source known to Human Rights Watch finally saw him in mid-March, Botakozuev appeared to have been tortured. In May Tajikistan extradited Botakozuev to Kyrgyzstan, where he was held for two weeks, released, and warned by state security to refrain

from human rights work.

Fair Elections

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitored the February 28, 2010, parliamentary election and found it "failed to meet key ... international standards for democratic elections."

District electoral commissions were often staffed by local officials and members of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT). Registration fees were onerously high. Free television time was allocated late in the campaign.

In its final report on the election, the OSCE noted credible accounts of violations of campaign rules by the authorities: "instances [in which] police prevented activists of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan from campaigning and in some cases detained them for a short time" and "credible allegations of pressure on government employees and voters to vote for or facilitate the victory of PDPT candidates." On election day OSCE and other observers found widespread proxy voting, instances of attempts to influence voters, multiple voting, ballot-box stuffing, and premarked ballots, among other infractions. Furthermore, the OSCE found that vote-counting procedures "were not properly followed in half of the polling stations observed."

Media Freedoms

The press in Tajikistan faced a clampdown in early 2010 in connection first with the parliamentary elections, and later with the clashes in the Rasht Valley. In February Reporters Without Borders issued a statement noting "an all-out drive to intimidate news media and get [independent media outlets] to [self-]censor their coverage of state authorities."

While one independent researcher found the government did not formally shut down any media outlets and even permitted the registration of new ones, debilitating defamation awards resulting from civil suits brought by government officials are threatening the livelihood of independent outlets and seem aimed at muffling the media.

In late January a Tajik court fined the newspaper *Paykon* 300,000 somonis (US\$69,000) in a libel suit regarding a report on corruption. The case was brought by Tajikstandart, the state agency that monitors the quality of imported goods. At around the same time two Supreme Court judges and one city court filed libel suits against three independent newsweeklies that ran stories about a press conference regarding alleged corruption within the Tajik judiciary. The Agriculture Ministry brought a libel suit against the *Millat* newspaper, in which it is seeking 1 million somonis (\$229,000) in damages.

On October 29, 2010, United States and European ambassadors issued a joint statement raising concern about the "deteriorating climate for independent media in Tajikistan." The statement noted, among other things, that "three newspapers, *Farazh*, *Paikon*, and *Nigoh*, have been effectively shut down by being unable to print their papers, reportedly on orders by government officials," that senior government officials had made public statements "attacking independent media outlets," and that a deputy minister had ordered the blocking of five major news websites. The websites – Tojnews.tj, Avesta.tj, Tjknews.com, Centrasia.ru, and Ferghana.ru – were blocked in the wake of the violence in the Rasht Valley.

Freedom of Religion

Hewing to a new religion law adopted in 2009, the state continued its repression of faith groups. Tajikistan has long curtailed freedom of religion and, under the pretext of battling terrorism, has banned several peaceful Muslim organizations. Certain Christian denominations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, continue to be banned in Tajikistan. At this writing the law bans all religious activity by unregistered religious groups. The

government now determines where mosques can be built and how many, and where Muslim sermons can be given, and it has censorship authority over religious literature (including material from abroad) and control over children's religious education; faith groups in Tajikistan must register with the state and get government permission to contact foreign religious groups.

Underscoring the importance of state control over religious activity, the new law removed oversight of religious groups from the Ministry of Culture and placed it with the Committee for Religious Affairs, which reports directly to the president. The state has relied on investigations, arrests, and convictions to squelch certain kinds of Muslim religious activity. In January a Dushanbe criminal court convicted Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov (known as Mullo Sirojiddin), a leader of the banned Salafi Muslim religious movement, and six other followers. An Islamic Revival Party leader told Forum 18, an independent religious news service, that Sirojiddin received a seven-year prison term, and his six co-defendants received prison terms of up to six years for "arousing national, racial, local or religious hostility." In April 2009, about 92 followers of the banned Jamaat Tabligh Islamic group were arrested. In March 2010, according to Forum 18, a group of 56 of them were convicted by the Supreme Court and were sentenced on charges of "organisation of banned extremist religious organizations." 23 defendants were given prison terms of between three and six years, and the other 33 defendants were fined between 25,000 somonis (US\$5,340) and 50,000 somonis (\$10,680), astronomical sums for the average Tajik. In May the remaining 36 Jamaat Tabligh defendants were convicted and received comparable prison and financial penalties. Rights groups in Tajikistan maintain that Jamaat Tabligh is peaceful and the ban on it was never published.

In May 2010, criminal investigations by the state secret police against 17 Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand were reopened. The group was arrested, interrogated, and threatened in September 2009, but the cases had been suspended after the group complained to the prosecutor general.

Women's Rights

The government took a few small steps forward to protect women from domestic violence, but overall the rights of women remain precarious. A November 2009 Amnesty International report estimated that one-third to one-half of Tajik women "may at some time experience physical, psychological or sexual violence at the hands of husbands or other family members." The report said that given women's severely restricted access to law enforcement and the general practice within the police to blame the victim and preserve the family, perpetrators can harm women with near impunity.

Still, in August 2010 five special police stations with staff trained by the OSCE to deal specifically with domestic violence were opened in Dushanbe, the capital, and other cities. The stations are the only ones of their kind in Central Asia, according to the OSCE, which urged the Tajik government to pass a law on domestic violence that has been pending since 2007. In August officials at a governmental research center said that preliminary results of their research show an increase in polygamy, although the practice is technically illegal, and that at least 10 percent of Tajik men have more than one wife.

In June 2010 President Rahmon signed a law that would raise the age of marriage for girls from 17 to 18 and would also require children to attend school for a minimum of 11 years, starting at age 7.

Key International Actors

The European Union upgraded relations with Tajikistan in early 2010 by concluding a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The EU describes the agreement as "enhanc[ing] bilateral relations and heighten[ing] the EU profile in Tajikistan." Its stated aim is also to "promote bilateral trade and investments." Meanwhile, the EU's record in speaking out about abuses remained poor. Human rights concerns appeared to be largely

relegated to once-yearly human rights dialogues, held at a relatively low level, with an obscure content and outcome.

In a January report on Tajikistan, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) commended the country on passing several important laws over the years to protect children. But the report went on to document that, in reality, children lack safeguards against abuse and neglect in almost every sphere of their lives. The UN CRC recommended that Tajikistan do more to protect children from institutionalization, violence, and child labor. It urged the state to take more serious action against polygamy, and to do more in general to protect women, girls, and children with disabilities.

Copyright notice: © Copyright 1992-2010, Human Rights Watch
