



# Freedom in the World 2013 - Tajikistan

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## 2013 Scores

Status: Not Free  
Freedom Rating: 6.0  
Civil Liberties: 6  
Political Rights: 6

## Ratings Change

Tajikistan's civil liberties rating declined from 5 to 6 due to a ban on students attending international seminars and a military operation in Gorno-Badakhshan that resulted in scores of deaths, extrajudicial killings, and a media crackdown.

## Overview

**The government of Tajikistan in 2012 conducted a large-scale military operation in the autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan province. After a ceasefire in early August, a local strongman and former opposition commander was killed in his home. The assassination sparked riots in Khorog, the region's largest city, forcing Dushanbe to withdraw forces from the region. Authorities took new steps to cut off public access to information and communication networks during and after the fighting.**

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

Rakhmonov was elected president in 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 Islamist 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, with a reintegration process to be overseen by a politically

balanced National Reconciliation Commission. A September 1999 referendum that permitted the formation of religion-based political parties paved the way for the legal operation of the Islamist 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 criticized by international observers.

Rakhmonov's People's Democratic Party (PDP) dominated the February 2000 legislative elections, which international monitors said had been flawed. After the elections, the National Reconciliation Commission was formally disbanded. However, important provisions of the 1997 peace accord remained unimplemented, with the demobilization of opposition factions incomplete and the government having failed to meet a 30 percent quota for UTO members in senior government posts.

A 2003 constitutional referendum cleared a path for Rakhmonov to seek two additional terms and remain in office until 2020. The PDP easily won 2005 parliamentary elections amid reports of large-scale irregularities.

Rakhmonov won the November 2006 presidential election with more than 70 percent of the vote, although the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) noted a lack of real competition. The president broadened his influence to the cultural sphere in 2007, de-Russifying his surname to "Rahmon" in March. He also signed legislation in May that established spending limits on birthday and wedding celebrations. The ruling PDP won 55 of 63 lower house seats in February 2010 parliamentary elections, which failed to meet basic democratic standards, according to OSCE monitors.

Also during 2010, the security situation experienced its worst deterioration since the 1992-97 civil war, with violence including a mass prison break, an attack on a police station in the northern city of Khujand that featured the country's first suicide bombing, and a guerrilla ambush that killed 30 soldiers in the remote Rasht Valley. In 2011, the government dispatched special forces to Rasht in a bid to extend control over one of the last areas left unofficially to former opposition commanders. The operations resulted in the deaths of several of these local strongmen.

In July, the government undertook a large-scale military operation in the autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan province after a senior provincial security official was killed there earlier that month. The operation, which left some 70 people dead, targeted former opposition commanders who had since taken on government posts, but were accused of involvement in the security official's death as well as drug trafficking and other crimes. In August, one target, Tolib Ayombekov, surrendered arms and men after several days of fighting and was placed under house arrest. Another, Imomnazar Imomnazarov, was murdered in a reported grenade attack in his home that was widely believed to be an extrajudicial killing, which sparked violent public protests and the subsequent withdrawal of troops.

In October, Russia reached a deal to keep troops dating to the Soviet era in Tajikistan through 2042. Iran, meanwhile, continued to fund construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant, and pledged to build an industrial center outside Dushanbe.

### **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. 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 eight are appointed by the president, all for five-year terms.

Corruption is pervasive. Patronage networks and regional affiliations are central to political life, with officials from the president's native Kulyob region dominant in government. At least two of

President Emomali Rahmon's children hold senior government posts, and various family members reportedly maintain extensive business interests in the country. Major irregularities at the National Bank of Tajikistan and the country's largest industrial company, TALCO Aluminum, have been documented. Tajikistan was ranked 157 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 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. Crippling libel judgments are common, particularly against newspapers that are critical of the government, though in July 2012 Tajikistan decriminalized libel, reclassifying it as a civil offense. However, the act of publicly insulting the president remains punishable by a jail term of up to five years. The government controls most printing presses, newsprint supplies, and broadcasting facilities, and most television stations are state-owned or only nominally independent. The government blocks some critical websites and online news outlets. During the 2012 military operations in Gorno-Badakhshan, the government shut down access not only to domestic news, but also international social media sites and self-publishing platforms. Cell phone communication was also shut down for days in the remote region, giving the government unprecedented information control over the situation.

The government has imposed a number of restrictions on religious freedom. A 2009 law restricts religious activities to state-approved houses of prayer. Authorities limit the number of mosques allowed in the country's towns, and in recent years have undertaken a campaign to shutter those that are not properly registered. Throughout 2012, Tajikistan continued to prosecute dozens of citizens for alleged membership in extremist religious organizations, and stepped up pressure against the legal IRP, whose Gorno-Badakhshan chief was killed under mysterious circumstances in the first days of the government's military operation there in July.

The country's limited religious education institutions have failed to integrate most of the 1,500 students who were pressured to return from religious schools abroad in 2010, and some have faced prosecution. In 2011, unprecedented new legislation on "parental responsibility" that came into force banned minors from attending regular religious services in mosques, and banned private religious education. Many religious leaders criticized the law or quietly refused to obey it. Wearing of the *hijab* (headscarf) in schools and higher educational institutions has been banned since 2005.

In October 2012, the government banned all university students from attending events or conferences organized by international or foreign organizations.

The government limits freedoms of assembly and association. Local government approval is required to hold public demonstrations, and officials reportedly refuse to grant permission in many cases. In August 2012, some 2,000 protesters gathered in Khorog to protest the murder of a former rebel leader and to demand that the government cease military activities in the area. The protesters vandalized the police office, and two people were reportedly wounded. The standoff ended after the government said it would withdraw troops from the area. In September, hundreds of people called for the government to provide compensation after a fire at a market in Dushanbe destroyed a number of vendors' stalls and killed at least one person. Security forces reportedly prevented the demonstrators from reaching the city center, and journalists attempting to cover the event were reportedly beaten and arrested.

Nongovernmental organizations must register with the Ministry of Justice. In October 2012, courts in Khujand shut down the rights group Amparo on a technicality, drawing protests from the international community. Citizens have the legal right to form and join trade unions and to bargain collectively, but trade unions are largely subservient to the authorities.

The judiciary lacks independence. Many judges are poorly trained and inexperienced, and bribery is reportedly widespread. Police frequently make arbitrary arrests and beat detainees to extract confessions. Overcrowding and disease contribute to often life-threatening conditions in prisons. Tajikistan is a major conduit for the smuggling of narcotics from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe, which has led to an increase in drug addiction within Tajikistan.

Sexual harassment, 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. 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.

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