

Freedom in the World 2012 - Tajikistan

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2012 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 5.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 6

Overview

Citing the need to curb extremism, the government in 2011 pushed through legislation that prohibits minors' participation in regular religious activities unless they receive state-supervised religious education. Scores of mosques were closed for alleged registration problems during the year, and the government announced that sermons in registered mosques could only be given on a short list of preapproved topics. The authorities continued to pressure journalists and curb freedom of speech through detentions, prosecutions, and the threat of heavy fines.

Former Communist Party leader Rakhmon Nabiyev 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 anti-Communist and Islamist movements, soon plunged the country into a five-year civil war. In September 1992, Communist hard-liners forced Nabiyev's resignation; he was replaced later that year by Emomali Rakhmonov, a leading Communist Party member.

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.

After 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 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 electoral problems. After the elections, the National Reconciliation Commission was formally disbanded. However, important provisions of the 1997 peace accord remained unimplemented, with demobilization of opposition factions incomplete and the government failing 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. Separately in 2005, Russian border guards who had long patrolled the frontier with Afghanistan completed their withdrawal. However, a Russian army division dating to the Soviet period remained in the country.

Rakhmonov won the November 2006 presidential election with more than 70 percent of the vote, although the 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 and signing legislation in May to establish spending limits on birthday and wedding celebrations.

The country suffered extreme economic hardship in 2008 and 2009 due to severe weather, power outages, and falling remittances from Tajiks working abroad. The ruling PDP nevertheless 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 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 its 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, including Ali Bedaki, who was apparently killed after being captured in January.

In September, Russia successfully negotiated a 49-year lease extension on its base in Tajikistan, which houses the largest Russian military presence in Central Asia. Russia also sought joint control of the Tajik-Afghan border and use of the Ayni airbase near Dushanbe, in which India was also reportedly interested. Iran, meanwhile, continued to fund construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant.

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 eight 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 by 2011 his son Rustam had attained the rank of major and been appointed to a newly created post in the Customs Agency in charge of fighting contraband, in addition to holding a significant number of other positions.

Corruption is reportedly pervasive. Members of the president's family allegedly maintain extensive business interests, and major irregularities at the National Bank and the country's largest industrial company, TALCO Aluminum, have been documented. Tajikistan was ranked 152 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 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. In October 2011, a court convicted *Nuri Zindagi* reporter Makhmadyusuf Ismoilov of slander and other charges but released him under an amnesty. He had been detained in late 2010 after publishing articles that accused local officials of corruption, and spent 11 months in detention. Also in October, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent Urunboy Usmonov was convicted of failing to report contacts with the banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, having interviewed and covered the trials of some of its members. He too was released under an amnesty; he claimed to have been tortured after his arrest in June. 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. Internet penetration is low. The government blocks some critical websites, and online news outlets are subject to criminal libel laws.

The government has imposed a number of restrictions on religious freedom. Wearing of the *hijab* (headscarf) in schools and higher educational institutions has been banned since 2005. In 2007, the authorities shut down large numbers of unauthorized mosques and instituted more restrictive rules for licensing religious leaders, and a 2009 law banned the promotion of any religion except the traditional Hanafi form of Islam. 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 January 2011, a new wave of mosque closures began, shuttering dozens of houses of worship, and the government announced plans to issue a list of some 60 approved topics on which imams could deliver Friday sermons. Unprecedented new legislation on "parental responsibility" that came into force in August banned minors from attending regular religious services in mosques unless they received officially sanctioned religious education. It was unclear how the government would enforce the law; many religious leaders criticized it or quietly refused to obey it.

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 virtually all cases. All nongovernmental organizations 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 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. 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.

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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