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Nations in Transit 2023 - Tajikistan

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME
1
/ 100
Democracy Percentage 0.60 / 100
Democracy Score 1.04 / 7
LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS
2 / 100 Consolidated Authoritarian Regime
The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. See the methodology.

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Score changes in 2023

- **Civil Society rating declined from 1.25 to 1.00** due to systemic repression of the civic sector in Tajikistan and its Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), which resulted in the arrest of hundreds of activists based inside and outside the country.
- **Local Democratic Governance rating declined from 1.50 to 1.25** due to increasing interference from the central government in GBAO local affairs and the culmination of a long post–civil war consolidation process.

As a result, **Tajikistan's Democracy Score declined from 1.11 to 1.04**.

Executive Summary

Tajikistan's authoritarian president, Emomali Rahmon, further consolidated his grip on power in 2022. In an effort to suppress independent institutions, the regime moved to criminalize the dissemination of false information about the armed forces.1 This occurred during a year in which the Tajik military

was used to curtail January unrest in Kazakhstan,[2] violently crack down on May protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO),[3] and engage in September armed conflict with Kyrgyzstan.[4] These events, along with continued refusal to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan, were used by Rahmon to portray himself and his family as the guarantors of peace and stability in Tajikistan,[5] and to justify the tightening of restrictions on civil rights as necessary to maintain national unity.

Tajikistan continues to be ruled by a nepotistic kleptocracy, with Rahmon's family exerting significant control over the economy and its key public and private assets, [6] including the state-owned Tajik Aluminum Company (a leading national exporter) and the country's main airline, Somon Air.[7] While low-level corruption is sometimes punished, high-level corruption remains pervasive within the government.

Individuals attempting to engage independently in political affairs face numerous obstacles and serious repercussions. In 2022, activists and opposition political figures experienced continual pressure, with those based outside Tajikistan at risk of abduction and forcible extradition. Even relatives of exiled opposition leaders and journalists faced harassment within the country's borders.

The Rahmon regime also exerts pressure on independent media outlets and continued to monopolize the country's information space in 2022. Journalists, dissidents, and activists are arrested or imprisoned on such charges as extremism, ties to banned opposition parties, or connections with the GBAO. Years of erosion of independent media and civil society became evident during the September escalation of Tajikistan's conflict with Kyrgyzstan. Domestic media relied heavily on government press releases for coverage of the conflict, thereby losing the information war against Kyrgyzstan's civil society.[8]

Tajikistan's economy remains in a downturn, with unemployment steadily rising since 2016, reaching almost 8 percent.[9] To cope, particularly in rural regions, Tajiks continued to seek employment and income abroad during the year. The flow of remittances from labor migrants—which amounted to 32 percent of Tajikistan's GDP in 2022[10] —continued to play an outsized role in the economy, creating serious dependence and hardships for families of labor migrants.[11] Despite promises of energy stability and independence, Tajikistan's rural areas still suffer from annual electricity rationing that lasts from October to late winter.[12] The Rahmon regime manages these significant economic difficulties and potential social unrest with financial support from the United States, Russia, China, the European Union (EU), and international institutions.[13]

The long-awaited transfer of power from President Rahmon to his eldest son, Rustam Emomali, did not occur in 2022. The tightly controlled 2020 elections resulted in the regime's predictable victory.[14] However, various factors, such as the lingering COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, escalating conflict with Kyrgyzstan, unrest in the GBAO, and Taliban rule in Kabul, have caused delays in the succession plans.[15] Nevertheless, the regime is likely to exploit these external crises to strengthen the security apparatus in preparation for the succession.[16]

At-A-Glance

Tajikistan's constitutional system is nominally democratic, but both national and local elections lack freedom, and President Emomali Rahmon and his People's Democratic Party hold significant political control. In reality, the country operates as a nepotistic kleptocracy, with Rahmon's family maintaining tight control over the economy and key public and private assets. The government significantly limits

the media, denying accreditation to independent journalists, imprisoning bloggers, and controlling broadcast content. The civic sector plays an active role in public life, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the military conflict with Kyrgyzstan, but suffers from inadequate funding and constant government interference. Political and dissenting voices face severe punishment through a pliant judiciary that fails to uphold basic due process guarantees. While the authorities periodically make a show of punishing low-level corruption, high-level corruption remains pervasive in the government.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	**1.00 / 7.00**

- Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, has been in power since November 1992. With the title "Leader of the Nation" since 2015, he is exempt from presidential term limits and will retain substantial authority even after resigning as president.[17] While Tajikistan has seven officially registered political parties, six of which are represented in the Majlisi Oli, or Supreme Assembly (Tajikistan's bicameral parliament), the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) dominates national and local politics. Rahmon's extended family maintains a tight hold on all major economic and social institutions.[18]

- Rustam Emomali, the president's 35-year-old eldest son, serves as chairman of the National Assembly, the parliament's upper chamber, and is designated to succeed his father if Rahmon steps down or is unable to fulfill his duties.[19] Rustam is also mayor of the nation's capital, Dushanbe. Ozoda Emomali, the eldest of the president's seven daughters, oversees the presidential administration, enabling her to have a decisive role in selecting and dismissing key government figures. Her husband, Jamoliddin Nuraliev, served as first deputy chairman of the National Bank from 2015 to 2022 and is also a former deputy finance minister.

- In 2022, the regime intensified its practice of detaining political opponents, activists, and dissidents, while exerting pressure on their families both inside and outside the country. In January, Chorshanbe Chorshanbiyev, a native of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), was extradited from Russia and arrested in Dushanbe for his antigovernment statement about the crackdown on the November 2021 protests in the GBAO.[20] He was later sentenced to eight and a half years in prison.[21] In April, GBAO activist Amriddin Alovatshoyev, abducted from Russia in January, was sentenced to 18 years in prison on charges of hostage-taking after only a two-hour trial.[22] In June, the mother and brother of exiled journalist Anora Sarkorova were detained and questioned over Sarkorova's coverage of the violent crackdown on the GBAO protests.[23] Overall, hundreds have been allegedly arrested in connection with the protests.[24] Majigul Gharibova, mother of jailed blogger Junaidullo Khudoyorov, was sentenced to two years of house arrest on charges of hooliganism, which the 66-year-old woman denies.[25] Shohida Mamadjonova, mother of exiled blogger Sherzod Mamadjonov, was sentenced to six years in prison on an extremism charge that Mamadjanov, an outspoken government critic, called a politically motivated attack on his family.[26] YouTube blogger and labor migrant rights activist Shodruz Akhrorov was deported from Russia and sentenced to six years in prison on extremism charges.[27] Komyor Mirzoev, a blogger and civil activist from the GBAO, was detained in Moscow and illegally transported to Dushanbe where he was sentenced to 10 years in prison.[28]

- In September, the Russian Supreme Court, at the request of the Tajik government, designated the banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan as a terrorist organization. This granted the Rahmon regime even more powers to pursue critics abroad.[29]

- Amid rising tensions, protests, and confrontations related to circumstances in the GBAO (see "Local Democratic Governance"), the Rahmon regime displayed an unprecedented level of severity, violently cracking down on protesters, suppressing local unofficial leaders, and targeting critical bloggers, journalists, and human rights activists across the country. Individuals associated with the GBAO faced arrests, and some activists were extradited from Russia. The government also targeted organizations and companies affiliated with the Aga Khan, a Europe-based philanthropist regarded as spiritual leader by Shia Ismailis of the GBAO.30 The crackdown hollowed out the GBAO civil society and has degraded the region's political autonomy.

- On September 14, border guards in Tajikistan's Isfara district exchanged fire with border guards in Kyrgyzstan's Batken district. This was one of many armed clashes that have occurred on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border since the conflict escalated in April 2021.31 By September 16, the situation had escalated, with both countries deploying artillery, tanks, and drones. As Tajikistan shelled local villages, over 130,000 people were evacuated from the Batken region.32 Video footage shows that Tajik armed forces crossed into Kyrgyz territory and involved irregular combatants.33 The situation stabilized after September 17, and a peace agreement was signed on September 25. The conflict resulted in a death toll of over a hundred on both sides. Rahmon utilized the conflict to portray himself and his family as the guarantors of peace and stability in Tajikistan,34 using the situation to justify imposing greater restrictions on civil rights to purportedly unite the country against internal and external enemies.

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.	**1.00 / 7.00**

- Emomali Rahmon and his People's Democratic Party (PDP) have dominated every presidential and parliamentary election in Tajikistan since its independence in 1991. Although the 1994 constitution and 1999 Law on Elections provide the basis for a multiparty system, elections have been marred by irregularities, including fraud allegations, widespread ballot stuffing, proxy voting, harassment, and intimidation of dissenting voices. The electoral environment is tightly controlled by state authorities, with long-standing restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms, including association, assembly, expression, and media. The absence of a central voter register or compilation of voter lists by local electoral commissions increase the risk of voter fraud. Opposition rallies are prohibited, and state media favor the ruling PDP. After the 2020 presidential election, OSCE observers criticized the electoral process for "lack[ing] credibility and transparency, including on election day," repeating their conclusions from the previous parliamentary and presidential elections.35

- The PDP controls the Majlis Namoyandagon, or Assembly of Representatives, holding 47 seats in the 63-seat lower chamber of parliament. Since the 2020 parliamentary elections, five nominally opposition parties have held the remaining 16 seats in the assembly. Yet none of these parties offers substantive opposition to government policies. The most vocal critic of the government—the Social Democratic Party—holds no seats in the assembly.36 The Majlisi Milli, or National Assembly (the upper house of parliament), has 33 members, all of whom are appointed. Rustam Emomali, the president's 35-year-old eldest son, serves as chairman of the National Assembly, meaning he is constitutionally designated to succeed his father if Rahmon steps down or is unable to fulfill his duties.37

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions;	**1.00 / 7.00**

interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

- As the Rahmon regime has tightened its grip on Tajikistan, the country's civic space has shrunk to the point of only allowing topics with little or no potential for confrontation or controversy. Criticism related to practical failures, specific legislation, and lower-level systems is tolerated in certain areas, such as the rights of children with disabilities. However, any direct criticism of the president, his family, or the nature of the regime is strictly prohibited for those who wish to operate within the civic space.38 Across Tajikistan, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), activists, and lawyers face threats and intimidation by the authorities to discourage them from taking up politically sensitive issues. Vocal human rights groups and NGOs are subjected to excessive and unannounced audits by tax authorities.

- Civil society actors in Tajikistan continue to face a heavily regulated environment for public engagement. The 2019 Law on Public Organizations significantly tightened the rules for NGOs and civil society organizations. The government annually rejects around two-thirds of applications to register a political party or a public association. Almost half of Tajikistan's 2,510 registered NGOs rely on foreign funding,39 and the Justice Ministry strictly monitors groups' adherence to a 10-day deadline to report any projects financed from abroad to the Register of Humanitarian Assistance to Public Associations under the guise of antiterrorism efforts.

- The government carefully controls large public organizations. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan (FNPT) remains under close supervision and fully endorses government initiatives. Only two NGOs, the FNPT and the Youth Union of Tajikistan, have the right to nominate candidates for the presidency.

- Following the violent May protests in the GBAO, a crackdown on the region's civil society led to arrests and prosecution of local unofficial leaders, activists, and journalists. The Education Ministry has threatened to revoke the license of a high school affiliated with the University of Central Asia (UCA), a college in the GBAO capital of Khorog, which is funded by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Other activities for children in the region have also faced pressure: summer camps funded by an Aga Khan organization have been canceled; and employees at a kindergarten run by the UCA fear their institution is being targeted for nationalization.40

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media. **1.00 / 7.00**

- While the country's media sphere has long been deprived of independence and freedom of expression, the Rahmon regime exploited the COVID-19 pandemic, GBAO unrest, and the military conflict with Kyrgyzstan to impose stricter restrictions on media, including the adoption of legislation to pressure individual journalists and bloggers and limiting the work of international media in the country. Legislation criminalizing the "dissemination of false information about the armed forces" hindered reporting on political dissent and involvement of the Tajik military in the year's border conflicts.41

- The National Association of Independent Mass Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT) says it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to obtain information from local authorities. Their recent report found that even the Prosecutor General's Office has failed to comply with legal requirements on the provision of information. The process for receiving information from the authorities is challenging: it requires journalists to send a written request on media letterhead to obtain official confirmation even of urgent news. The authorities usually refuse to provide

information over the phone. NANSMIT also noted that the press offices of ministries and departments often fail to respond to written requests from editors.42

- Human rights activists and journalists reported increased activity during the year by troll factories and state organized bloggers, who carried out campaigns to discredit and silence critical voices online—a measure the government has implicitly acknowledged using in the past.43 These operations abused reporting mechanisms on Facebook or YouTube to file complaints against groups who are critical of the authorities and raise current issues of public concern. Typically, hundreds of trolls file complaints against such groups, which causes Facebook or YouTube to block them.44
- The NGO International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) documented the use of targeted revenge porn attacks against women journalists, who were threatened with the publication of compromising intimate material online to deter them from critical reporting.45
- The Rahmon regime continued to exert pressure on independent media outlets, and monopolize the information space in Tajikistan. In May, two RFE/RL journalists and two journalists from the program *Current Time* were attacked by unknown assailants after they interviewed Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva.46 In June, citizen journalists Daler Imomali and Abdullo Ghurbati were arrested for their critical reporting on public officials and later sentenced to 10 and 7.5 years in prison, respectively.47 During the same month, retired journalist and intelligence officer Mamadsulton Mavlonazarov, known by his pen name Muhammad Sulton, was taken into custody by the State Committee for National Security on charges of extremism, likely motivated by his condemnation of the government's handling of the protests in his home region of GBAO.48 He was later sentenced to seven years in prison.49 Journalist Abdusattor Pirmuhammadzoda was arrested for alleged "public calls for extremist activities" and sentenced to seven years in prison.50 Independent reporter Zavqibek Saidamini was sentenced to seven years in prison for alleged links to two banned opposition parties, the Islamic Renaissance Party and Group 24, allegations that Saidamini repeatedly denied.51 Khushruz Jumaev, a blogger from the GBAO, who mostly writes articles about the culture of the region, was sentenced to 8 years in prison for an alleged membership in a criminal group.52 The website of Asia-Plus, one of the most visited online independent media outlets in the country, remained blocked due to "technical issues" on the .tj domain, which is administered by a government agency.
- Years of government pressure and restrictions in Tajikistan have robbed the media of their capacity to function effectively. This was particularly evident during the September 2022 border conflict with Kyrgyzstan, when Tajikistan's media published false information, made editorial and ethical mistakes, and heavily relied on government press releases for coverage. In the information war, Tajikistan's media lost ground to Kyrgyzstan's civil society.53 The state media further exacerbated the situation by largely ignoring these border clashes.54

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities. 1.25 / 7.00

- Despite Tajikistan's constitutional separation of powers between national and local government bodies, the Rahmon regime exercises direct control over all processes, disregarding international best practices for engaging with local governments and civic actors. Regional governors, heads of districts, and city mayors are directly appointed and dismissed by the president without the participation of local communities or legislatures. On paper, only candidates for governor in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) are approved by the regional assembly.55

- The Majlisi Oli, or Supreme Assembly (Tajikistan's parliament), passed a law in 2009 on the self-government of settlements and villages (jamoats) that allows local councils to nominate chairmen. In theory, the law should have significantly empowered the 370 jamoats in the country, but it was never implemented. Jamoats have only a few thousand inhabitants each and are considered the lowest level of administrative division. City and district councils are the next level above jamoats in this hierarchy.
- Any form of protest activity against the local government is strictly discouraged. In 2022, Tajikistan recorded no protests outside of the GBAO, resulting in the lowest number of protests in Central Asia and on par with the region's most autocratic country, Turkmenistan.
- On May 14, over a thousand people gathered in Khorog, capital of the GBAO, to peacefully demand the resignation of regional leader Alisher Mirzonabot, appointed by the central government in Dushanbe—and also to demand an effective investigation into the murder of Gulbidin Ziyobekov that had sparked mass protests in the GBAO in November 2021.56 On May 16, the Tajik armed forces cut off the internet in the entire region and cracked down on protesters, leaving at least one person dead and several wounded.57 Attacks on civilians in Khorog escalated on May 17 and 18 with the reported use of tear gas grenades and live ammunition. On May 18, the Internal Affairs Ministry announced an "antiterrorist operation" in Rushon, whose residents were denied the right to leave or enter the district. Local witnesses reported the use of snipers and military helicopters against civilians, arbitrary house searches and phone seizures, and mass detentions, torture, and deliberate extra-judicial executions. At least 40 civilians were killed and hundreds of residents of the GBAO were arrested, amidst a total information blackout.58 The crackdown extended beyond the GBAO: the Rahmon regime targeted critical bloggers, journalists, and human rights activists with ties to the GBAO across the country and even extraditing them from Russia. The government also cracked down on organizations and companies controlled by the Aga Khan, a Europe-based philanthropist deemed spiritual leader by Shia Ismailis of the GBAO.59 These incidents have led to the erosion of the region's civil society and political autonomy.

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.	**1.00 / 7.00**

- Tajikistan's judicial system remains tightly controlled by the Rahmon regime. Politically or socially significant cases are often heard behind closed doors, with civil society representatives and independent media barred from monitoring court proceedings. Occasional mass amnesties, including in September 2021 dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the country's independence, typically exclude political prisoners and apply to women, individuals younger than 18 or older than 55, disabled persons, inmates with serious illnesses, people with state awards, war veterans, and foreign nationals.60
- The Rahmon regime continued to persecute members of informal religious groups during the year, firmly keeping Tajikistan on the US State Department's register of the world's worst violators of religious freedom.61 In July, the government detained Ismaili cleric Muzaffar Davlatmirov on charges of inciting extremist activities and sentenced him to five years in prison.62 In September, the government also forced the closure of two important religious institutions in Dushanbe: a tariqa, or school, used by adherents of the Shia Ismaili faith and a bookshop trading in Islamic literature.63
- Authorities denied defendants proper legal representation and coerced confessions under duress in 2022, particularly targeting those accused of involvement in pro-autonomy protests in the

GBAO. Very few who were accused had access to legal representation,64 and dozens of the arrested have faced closed, unfair, and rushed trials.65

- Government pressure intensified during the year on lawyers who express dissent or take up human rights cases. Izzat Amon, a human rights lawyer sentenced to nine years in prison in 2021 on fraud charges, is now facing additional fraud charges that would add three years to his sentence.66 Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, director of the Pamir Lawyers' Association; Ulfathonim Mamadshoeva, a prominent human rights activist; and GBAO activists Faromuz Irgashev and Khursand Mamadshoev were all given long prison sentences for their ties to protests in the GBAO.67

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.	**1.00 / 7.00**

- Corruption remains endemic at every level of the Tajik economy and society. The Rahmon regime prioritizes corrupt interests and the enrichment of elites over the needs of the population. The well-documented misappropriation of revenue derived from the country's natural resources—including profits of the state-owned Tajik Aluminum Company (TALCO), a leading national exporter68 —by the Rahmon family has severely hindered investment in social welfare.69 Although the government has adopted multiple anticorruption reforms—including those associated with participation in the OECD Anti-Corruption Network (OECD/ACN) for Eastern Europe and Central Asia,70 and through collaboration with the Economic Crime and Cooperation Division (ECCD) of the Council of Europe71 —these reforms have yielded no significant results.

- In 2022, authorities prosecuted 2,100 corruption cases in which over $24.7 million was embezzled.72 Most of these violations were committed by local officials, state bank employees, and officials in education and land management agencies. The authorities periodically make a show of punishing low-level corruption, while ignoring pervasive corruption at the highest levels of government. For example, in 2022, four judges were arrested over charges of corruption and fraud.73 The authorities of the Sughd region issued warrants for 27 public officials for alleged corruption and embezzlement.74

- While the previous two years were marked by a series of major corruption investigations,75 including the case of $31 million in stolen state funds,76 few such developments were reported in 2022. Leaked banking data from OCCRP's "Suisse Secrets" investigation revealed that Qosim Rohbar, former governor of the Sughd region and agriculture minister, had an account at Credit Suisse in 2004–11 holding about $8.5 million.77

- In its annual statement on Tajikistan's investment climate, the US State Department noted that enforcement of anticorruption legislation continues to be politically motivated and generally ineffective at combating corruption among public officials. According to the statement, US companies have "identified corruption as an obstacle to investment and have reported instances of corruption in government procurement, awards of licenses and concessions, dispute settlements, regulations, customs, and taxation."78

- The authorities do not provide security guarantees and protections for NGOs focused on fighting corruption. Civil society representatives have very limited access to public procurement materials and may not participate in the public expenditure control process.

- The 2022 crackdown on GBAO activists turned into a money-making scheme for law enforcement officials. Relatives of detained protesters reported that law enforcement officials sought bribes in exchange for negotiating milder charges.79

- The crackdown on GBAO activists extended to commercial entities tied to the Aga Khan. First Microfinance Bank (FMB) and TCell, a mobile telecommunications company, underwent unannounced and prolonged tax audits. Previously, commercial entities have been taken over by figures connected to the Rahmon family. Insiders at FMB and TCell worry that the audits may aim to uncover potentially compromising information, setting the stage for possible takeovers.80

Footnotes

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