



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

Tajikistan

NOT FREE

8

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	0 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	8 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

9 /100 **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

Overview

The authoritarian regime of President Emomali Rahmon, who has ruled since 1992, severely restricts political rights and civil liberties. The political opposition and independent media have been devastated by a sustained campaign of repression, and the government exerts tight control over religious expression and activity. Wealth and authority are concentrated in the hands of Rahmon and his family.

Key Developments in 2020

- The ruling People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) won legislative elections in March, taking 47 lower-house seats in a contest that did not meet democratic standards.
- President Rahmon won a fifth term in office in October, receiving 90.9 percent of the vote according to the electoral authorities. The opposition Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) boycotted the contest, which was marred by reports of fraud.
- At least 20 professors were among those arrested for alleged Muslim Brotherhood membership in January.
- Tajikistani authorities did not report the presence of COVID-19 until the end of April. The intentional spread of the virus and the dissemination of purportedly false pandemic-related news was criminalized in June. Authorities reported 13,665 cases and 90 deaths to the World Health Organization (WHO) by year’s end.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

The president is chief of state and is elected for up to two seven-year terms under current rules, but constitutional amendments ratified in 2016 removed term limits for Rahmon, who holds the official status of “leader of the nation.”

A presidential election was due in November 2020, but legislators moved the poll to a date in October. President Rahmon won that election and a fifth term with 90.9 percent of the vote according to the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums (CCER). Four candidates from progovernment parties won a combined 7.8 percent, while the SDPT boycotted the contest.

The European Council called the election orderly but noted that previous Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recommendations on the media and political environment remained unfulfilled. While independent media outlets were largely unable to observe polling stations, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported incidents of apparent ballot stuffing and of voters submitting ballots on behalf of family members.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

The bicameral Supreme Assembly is composed of an upper house, the National Assembly, and a lower house, the Assembly of Representatives. The National Assembly comprises 25 members chosen by local assemblies and 8 appointed by the president; former presidents are also entitled to a seat. The 63-member Assembly of Representatives is popularly elected through a mixed system of 41 single-member constituencies and 22 proportional-representation seats. Supreme Assembly members serve five-year terms.

In the March 2020 elections, the PDPT won 47 lower-house seats, while progovernment parties divided the remainder. The SDPT did not exceed the 5 percent threshold for representation according to the CCER. OSCE monitors reported that the elections did not meet democratic standards. Reporters for media outlet Asia-Plus documented incidents of officials agreeing to supply ballots to reporters claiming to represent family members.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0 / 4

The CCER is subservient to the government and enforces electoral laws in an inconsistent and nontransparent manner. Despite reforms ahead of the 2015 elections, constituencies vary considerably in population, undermining equal suffrage.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0 / 4

The government consistently marginalizes independent or opposition parties, which have become excluded from the political process. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)—which had been the country’s most significant opposition group—lost its legal registration and was declared a terrorist organization in 2015. The 2016 constitutional amendments banned faith-based parties, effectively preventing the IRPT from reforming. The National Alliance of Tajikistan, a Europe-based refugee opposition coalition, was declared a terrorist organization in 2019.

The authorities continued to harass and arrest members of the IRPT, political movement Group 24, and members’ extended families during 2020. In March, Hizbullo Shovalizoda was extradited from Austria to Tajikistan and was accused of IRPT membership. Shovalizoda received a 20-year prison sentence in June. In September, Group 24 activist Shobuddin Badalov was detained in the Russian city of Nizhniy Novgorod; Badalov previously organized a rally to protest Rahmon’s June visit to Moscow. Two days after his detention, Group 24 reported that Badalov had been extradited to Tajikistan.

Relatives of deceased or imprisoned opposition figures were also targeted. Authorities detained Asroriddin Rozikov in June and accused him of activity in an extremist organization in July. Asroriddin’s father, senior IRPT member Zubaidullohi Rozik, was imprisoned in 2016. In August, police detained five sons of IRPT cofounder Said Kiemitdin Gozi, who died in prison in unclear circumstances in 2019.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

O / 4

Tajikistan has no record of peaceful transfers of power between rival parties. Rahmon first became chief executive in 1992, during the country's 1992–97 civil war, and has held the presidency since the office's creation in 1994. Under the 2016 constitutional revisions, he is entitled to run for reelection indefinitely and to overrule cabinet decisions even after leaving office. The amendments also lowered the minimum age for presidents from 35 to 30 years, which would have allowed Rahmon's son, Rustam Emomali, to seek the presidency in 2020. In April, Emomali was named National Assembly chairman, placing him second in the presidential line of succession.

Years of unrelenting repression of independent political activity have left opposition parties unable to compete in elections. The administration exerts complete control over the electoral process and prevents any substantial competition for the presidency or the parliament. Many IRPT members and their relatives were beaten, harassed, and imprisoned before the 2015 elections, with some reportedly tortured in custody or killed in prison.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

O / 4

Political affairs in Tajikistan are controlled almost exclusively by Rahmon and his extended family, leaving citizens with few avenues to participate in the political process. Presidential family members hold numerous public positions and control key sectors of the private economy.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

O / 4

No segment of the population enjoys full political rights or electoral opportunities in practice. The regime, which seeks to suppress any genuine dissent, does not permit women, minorities, or religious groups to organize independently to advance their political interests. Women remain underrepresented in the political system, both as voters and in elected positions.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0 / 4

The president, who is not freely elected, and his inner circle are virtually unopposed in determining and implementing policy. The PDPT-controlled legislature does not offer a meaningful check on the executive's expansive constitutional authority. Officials from the president's native Kulob District are dominant within government. Rahmon has strengthened his family's grip on power by installing Rustam Emomali as Dushanbe's mayor in 2017 and as National Assembly chairman in April 2020.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0 / 4

Patronage networks and regional affiliations are central to political life, corruption is pervasive, and laws designed to prevent it are routinely ignored. Major irregularities have been reported at the National Bank of Tajikistan and the country's largest industrial firm, the state-owned Tajik Aluminum Company.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0 / 4

Government decision-making and budgetary processes lack transparency, and public officials are not required to disclose financial information. Crackdowns on the media,

the opposition, and civil society have further reduced independent scrutiny of state operations. In recent years, the government has concluded extensive infrastructure and resource-extraction agreements with the Chinese government and Chinese companies, with little consultation or transparency.

The government initially denied the presence of COVID-19, with the Health Ministry instead blaming reported pneumonia cases on the weather. The government did not disclose the presence of COVID-19 until April 2020.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0/4
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The government controls most printing presses, newsprint supplies, and broadcasting facilities, and denies independent media access to these resources. The state shuts out independent outlets and encourages self-censorship. Independent journalists face harassment and intimidation. Civil libel charges have been used to cripple outlets that criticize the government. Authorities routinely block critical websites, news portals, and social media platforms, while using periodic wholesale blackouts of internet and messaging services to suppress criticism.

The government continued to target journalists in 2020. In January, authorities detained journalist Daler Sharifov, accusing him of producing extremist content. Sharifov received a one-year prison sentence in a closed trial in April, and his health has reportedly deteriorated while imprisoned in a penal colony. In late May, Asia-Plus journalist Abdullo Gurbati was assaulted while covering a mudslide in the southern district of Khuroson. The Ministry of Internal Affairs blamed Gurbati for the incident, claiming that he attempted to film residents without their consent. Three people were arrested for assaulting Gurbati in early June and received fines for petty hooliganism.

In April, state news agency Khovar reported the blocking of Prague-based news site Akhbor, which authorities claimed served as a platform for terrorism and extremism; the order had taken effect in March. Before it was blocked, and as the government downplayed the spread of COVID-19, the outlet reported on a rise in illnesses and deaths in Tajikistan. In June, a state-television documentary exposed the personal details of several journalists reportedly affiliated with Akhbor.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

0 / 4

The government imposes severe restrictions on religious freedom, in part by limiting religious activities to state-approved venues and registered organizations. Authorities continue to prosecute individuals for alleged membership in banned religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim groups. Minors are generally barred from attending religious services in mosques, as are women in most cases.

Laws to discourage religious clothing (like the hijab) as well as an unofficial ban on beards for men are arbitrarily enforced. A government-published “guidebook” details recommended dress for women that excludes the hijab and similar garments in favor of “traditional” or “national” alternatives. The government has pressured students to adhere to these dress codes, establishing roadblocks in some areas to search for those who violate them.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

0 / 4

The government exerts significant political pressure on universities and academic personnel. In recent years, international scholars have noted the self-exile of Tajikistani academics who faced harassment from security services, surveillance and self-censorship within higher-education institutions, scrutiny of scholars who cooperate with foreign colleagues, and the appointment of officials backed by security services to senior academic posts. Opportunities to study abroad, especially for religious education, are tightly restricted.

In January 2020, authorities arrested at least 113 people for their alleged affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is banned in Tajikistan; Prosecutor General Yusuf Rahmon reported that over 20 professors were among those arrested that month. At least 30 people were released in February, though 20 defendants received prison sentences in August; their names were not publicly released.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because authorities arrested academics over alleged Muslim Brotherhood affiliation.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

1 / 4

Restrictive laws and government surveillance serve as deterrents to open discussion of sensitive topics, including criticism of the country's leadership. A 2017 law allows authorities to monitor citizens' online behavior and prescribes fines and prison sentences for those who visit "undesirable websites," among other provisions.

In January 2020, an amended antiextremism law came into effect, allowing the government to block websites without a court order. The dissemination of purportedly false COVID-19-related news was criminalized in June.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0 / 4

The government strictly limits freedom of assembly. Local government approval is required to hold demonstrations, which officials often refuse to grant.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that

are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

1/4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the Justice Ministry and are vulnerable to closure for minor technical violations. NGOs must disclose funding from foreign sources. Foreign funds must be logged in a state registry before organizations can access them, and the government oversees operations supported by those funds. Under legislation implemented in 2019, NGOs are obliged to maintain their own websites and publish reports that comply with more expansive and vaguely worded financial reporting to prove they have no “terrorist financing” or “money laundering” links.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

1/4

Citizens have the legal right to form and join trade unions and to bargain collectively, but these rights and the right to strike are undermined by general legal restrictions on freedoms of assembly and association. There are no laws against antiunion discrimination by employers, and the country’s trade union federation is government-controlled.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0/4

The judiciary lacks independence. Many judges are poorly trained and inexperienced, and bribery is widespread. The 2016 constitutional amendments abolished the Council of Justice, transferring the authority for most judicial nomination and oversight functions to the Supreme Court. However, these powers remain under executive control in practice. The courts’ opaque and biased adjudication of numerous cases

against opposition figures and other dissidents, particularly since 2015, has demonstrated their subordination to the political leadership.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

0 / 4

Arbitrary arrests and detentions are common, as is corruption among law-enforcement agencies. Defendants are often denied timely access to an attorney, and politically fraught trials are frequently closed to the public. Nearly all defendants are found guilty.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0 / 4

Civilians are subject to physical abuse by security forces and have no meaningful opportunity to seek justice for such violations. Detainees are reportedly beaten in custody to extract confessions. Overcrowding and disease contribute to often life-threatening conditions in prisons.

Authorities reportedly did little to limit the spread of COVID-19 within the prison system. In July 2020, Justice Minister Muzaffar Ashurion disclosed the pneumonia-related deaths of 98 prisoners, 11 of whom died after the pandemic began. Ashurion also denied the coronavirus's presence in the prison system.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

1 / 4

Discrimination against ethnic minorities is not a major problem. However, women face bias and disparate treatment in the workplace, and discrimination or violence against LGBT+ people is common. There is no legislation against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBT+ people frequently face abuse by security forces.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1 / 4

Most citizens can travel within the country, but must register their permanent residence with local authorities. Students interested in studying Islamic theology are forbidden from seeking education abroad. Some areas, particularly Gorno-Badakhshan, feature a heavier security presence that includes police checkpoints, which hamper travel and provide opportunities for extortion and other abuses.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1 / 4

By law, all land belongs to the state. Corruption and regulatory dysfunction affect enterprises ranging from peasant farms to large companies. The president's extended family and others from his native Kulob District maintain extensive business interests in the country and dominate key economic sectors, impeding business activity by those without such political connections.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

1 / 4

Although forced marriage and polygamy are legally prohibited, marriages arranged by parents and religious marriages that allow polygamy are both common in practice. Because of local interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law), women are often unable to

exercise their rights to divorce. Domestic violence is widespread, but cases are underreported and seldom investigated adequately.

Reports indicate that women sometimes face societal pressure to wear headscarves. Meanwhile, in addition to restricting hijabs for women and beards for men, the government interferes more broadly in matters of personal appearance. A 2018 guidebook outlined acceptable and unacceptable styles of dress for women, barring clothing that could be deemed immodest or “foreign” in origin.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1 / 4

Safeguards against forms of labor exploitation and hazardous working conditions are not well enforced. The scarcity of economic opportunity has compelled citizens to seek work abroad in large numbers, and these migrant workers are at risk of exploitation by human traffickers.

However, the 2020 edition of the US State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons* report reported that the Tajikistani government is working to combat human trafficking by prosecuting traffickers and supporting survivors via a state-run shelter, among other activities. However, the report noted that government officials suspected of involvement in trafficking are not investigated.



On Tajikistan

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

8/100 **Not Free**

Other Years

2020

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