

Tajikistan: Civil War's Long Echo

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SUMMARY

- After signing the Agreement on Peace and National Accord with the opposition in 1997, President Rakhmon set about building an authoritarian regime in Tajikistan.
- Today, the authorities face several internal challenges: an economic crisis, regionalism, domestic political confrontation, and radical Islam.
- It will be difficult, if not impossible, to organize “Maidan Tahrir”-type mass protests of the kind that took place on Cairo’s main square and toppled Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt in the spring of 2011.
- None of the external players today has an interest in radically escalating the situation in the country, much less in provoking Tajikistan’s collapse. Russia hopes to keep the country within its sphere of influence by participating in key projects there and providing military aid.

In terms of internal and external security, Tajikistan has been among the most problematic countries in Central Asia. It is the only state in the region to have gone through a protracted civil war (1992-1997), which, according to various estimates, killed between 23,500 and 100,000 people¹ (perhaps even more) and left the economy in ruins. The causes of this war were rooted not only in political confrontation, but also in confrontation between different regions, clans, and personalities, as well as confrontation within Islam between those who

sought to build a secular state and those who wanted an Islamic state.

Tajikistan is an ethnic and linguistic exception in Central Asia. Unlike most of the region’s population, which is of Turkic origin, the Tajiks belong to the Iranian group and, though they have many features in common with their neighbors, nonetheless maintain a unique ethnic and cultural identity of their own. The Tajiks are a settled people, which makes their traditions, mentality, and behavioral norms different from those of their (until recently)



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nomadic neighbors. The Tajiks are more religious, hence the earlier and more intensive revival of Islam that began during the late Soviet period and steadily became politicized. It was in Tajikistan that the first and only remaining legal religious party in the post-Soviet area was formed, the Islamic Revival Party (IRP).

Events in Afghanistan (where ethnic Tajiks make up 27-38 percent of the population) have a greater impact on Tajikistan than on any other Central Asian country. The 1,400 km-long Tajik-Afghan border zone is one of the most volatile in the Central Asian region. More than any country, Tajikistan wants to see peace in Afghanistan. The conflict in Afghanistan resounds in a constant tragic echo across Tajikistan. At the same time, few remember now that in the mid-1990s, Afghan politicians in turn had worried about Tajikistan's civil war. It was in Kabul in 1995 that the first real peace talks took place between the warring parties in Tajikistan's conflict, under an initiative organized by then Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmadshah Masoud, a distinguished Afghan of ethnic Tajik descent. Renowned film director and public figure Davlat Khudonazarov, who took part in the talks, said that the choice of Kabul as venue for the talks was fortunate also in that "The very atmosphere of this city in ruins was a warning signal to the Tajiks to give up armed confrontation and seek peace."²

In 1997, the civil war ended in a compromise between the Popular Front and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), at the foundation of which was the IRP. The two sides signed the Agreement on Peace and National Accord. The Popular Front, however, saw this deal as a victory. President Emomali Rakhmonov (he later "de-russified" his last name by removing the "ov" at the end) set about building an authoritarian regime. Three circumstances made him confident of success: first, ordinary people yearned above all for security and stability after the civil war years, and most of society thought a firm hand at the top could bring them these things; second, Russia, which in fact had supported Rakhmonov, both during his battle with the opposition and as a mediator at the peace talks, tacitly backed the idea of an authoritarian regime (essentially a dictatorship) in Tajikistan; third, Rakhmonov, like the other Central Asian presidents, had positioned himself as the bulwark against Islamic extremism and the only person who could save Tajikistan from going down the Taliban road (the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996.)

Rakhmon had been head of state since 1992, when he became chairman of the republic's Supreme Soviet. In 1994, he was elected to a five-year term as president, was re-elected in 1999 and again in 2006, (to a 7-year term; the Constitution was amended accordingly in 2003.) Consolidating

his regime, he set about purposefully removing his rivals from the former UTO, thus renouncing the national reconciliation policy, and gradually removed from power those among even his allies who looked capable of becoming potential rivals. The list of politicians removed from the stage includes Abdumalik Abdulladzhanov (prime minister in 1992-1993), Safarali Kenzhayev (founder of the Popular Front, killed in 1999), Yakub Salimov (former interior minister), and Abduzhalil Samadov (prime minister in 1993-1994, died in Moscow in 2004).

Rakhmon used carrot and stick tactics. Many of the prominent opposition figures, including field commanders, received large land holdings, enterprises, and control of some local markets after 1997. This was payment in exchange for abandoning political activities. Head of the UTO Said Abdullo Nuri, who moved into a fine villa in the center of Dushanbe, also took a passive stance. The IRP had two seats in the Tajik parliament. Gradually however, Rakhmon started taking tougher measures in order to remove real and potential rivals. In 2009, for example, former head of the country's Emergency Situations Ministry, Mirzo Zeyev, one of the most prominent figures in the UTO, died under unknown circumstances.

Pressure on the media increased. As well-known opposition journalist Dododzhon Atovulloyev put it, "Tajikistan had a free press before Rakh-

mon... Under Rakhmon Nabiyev [the previous president – A.M.], each time our newspaper, *Charogi Ruz*, came out, we'd get calls at our office from the head of the presidential administration... dozens of officials were fired. Ministers trembled when they got a visit from our paper's journalists. [President] Rakhmon's arrival

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in power was the day that marked the death knell for our free press."³ The freedom of the press index published by Reporters without Borders placed Tajikistan at number 122 of 179 countries in 2011-2012 (previously it had been at number 115.)

The ruling regime faces several internal challenges: a permanent economic crisis, regionalism, domestic political confrontation, and the presence of radical Islam. These dangers are all closely interwoven. To a great extent, political confrontation is rooted in contradictions between the regions (the Sogd, Garm, Kulyab, and Gorny Badakhshan) and radical Islam, espoused by the opposition, which has its base primarily in the Garm and Gorny Badakhshan regions. During

the civil war, separatist tendencies even emerged in the Gorny Badakhshan Autonomous Region (though the region's ethnic diversity would hardly make it realistic to actually carry out such ideas).

After an initial lull following the civil war's end, the Islamists gradually stepped up their activity once again. Rakhmon at first pretended that the problem concerned no more than a few criminal groups, but since 2007 he has been using various pretexts to send troops into the Rasht Valley, where the Islamist opposition forces have the biggest support (in 2009, for example, troops were sent there ostensibly to destroy the poppy crop, although poppies had never been grown in the valley in the first place.)⁴ The situation worsened in 2010 when rebels emerged in parts of the country under the leadership

Abdullo Rakhimov (Sheikh Abdullo), one of the most prominent figures in the UTO, refused to sign the Peace and National Accord Agreement in 1997. In 1999, he left for Afghanistan, returned to Tajikistan in 2009, and resumed his struggle against the current regime. There are around 300 armed rebels active in the country, but, depending on the circumstances, they could be joined by tens of thousands of the discontented, and could receive support from abroad.

The IRP's position influences the relations between the Islamic opposition groups and the regime. Since the death of Said Abdullo Nuri in 2006, the IRP has been headed by Mohiddin Kabiri, who espouses reformist views and can be seen as a pragmatic opposition figure willing to engage in dialogue with the authorities. What is interesting is that one of the factors prompting this dialogue is the increasing popularity of the unrecognized Hizb at-Tahrir party and the Bayat organization, which act independently from the IRP and want to establish a Central Asian caliphate. This runs counter to the ideology promoted by the IRP, which wants to build an Islamic Tajik state. Kobiri's influence among Muslims has increased in recent years. It is telling, too, that he has concentrated much effort of late on supporting Tajik migrants working in Russia, coming to Russia to hold meetings with them.

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of intransigent field commanders Abdullo Rakhimov and Alovuddin Davlatov, who were dubbed the "Tajik Taliban." They engaged in armed clashes with army forces in which both sides suffered losses (specifically around 50 servicemen killed and dozens captured by the rebels).

A struggle for Islam is underway today in Tajikistan, with each side battling for the right to be the sole true guardian of tradition, speak on behalf of Islam, and use it as a political instrument. Rakhmon tried to “monopolize” Islam and deepen its hold on society, setting up a system of religious education controlled by him, building a huge mosque in Dushanbe that can hold 100,000 people (some say 150,000 people), and professing Hanafi Islam while trying to diminish the influence of other currents, above all Salafi Islam. He proclaimed 2009 the “year of the Great Imam”⁵ (in this sense, one can draw a parallel between Rakhmon and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who, though a secular politician, is a proponent of Chechnya’s total Islamization.)

However, Rakhmon’s declared Islamization policy then began to spin out of his control. A parallel religious education system developed that was not controlled by the president, and the sermons read in the mosques were not always in line with Hanafi Islam or with the official ideology. Not all of the clergy has been loyal to the regime. Rakhmon soon realized that he had failed in his bid to bring Islam under his own control, and as a result Islam’s increasing influence in society began to threaten the regime itself. He then took measures to curtail religion’s political influence. In 2010, he started closing mosques in which non-loyal clerics preached,⁶

ordered 1,400 students studying in Islamic institutes abroad to return home (including 200 from Iran),⁷ and banned women from wearing traditional Muslim clothing in public places, above all in state institutions. This de-Islamization reached a peak in 2011 with the adoption of the law on Parental Responsibility for the Education and Upbringing of Their Children, which bans children

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under 18 from attending mosques unless accompanied by older family members.⁸ The law drew fierce criticism from Muslim faithful and has been violated *en masse*.

Having lost in the Islamic field, Rakhmon continued to strengthen his authoritarian regime, trying to remove any real competition to himself. A total of 70.6 percent of the voters supported the presidential National Democratic Party in the February 2010 parliamentary election, and it won 52 of the 85 seats. The IRP got two seats (it came in second place with 8.2 percent of the vote), as did the Communist Party, the Party of Economic Reform, and the Agrarian Party. Not without justification, the opposition accused the authorities of falsifying the elections, and Rakhmatullo Zairov, leader of the Social

Democratic Party, which did not make it into the parliament, spoke of a “usurpation of power.”⁹

The Tajik drug trafficking mafia, which includes a sizeable number of bureaucrats, is also happy enough with the status quo. Thus, if the opposition does succeed in organizing mass protests, they will encounter stiff resistance. Rather than leading to a painless regime change, a new confrontation could usher in a new civil war.

Rakhmon’s desire for absolute rule has sometimes gone to absurd lengths. It is now customary in Tajikistan to address the president as “*Chanobi Oli*,” an expression identical in meaning to “Your Majesty.” The political system has taken the nepotistic turn typical of Central Asian regimes, with practically every member of Rakhmon’s family (and he has nine children) getting a high official post.

Tajikistan’s regime looks similar in some respects to Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s toppled regime in Kyrgyzstan. The Tajikistan News website features very telling and even provocative comparisons between the two countries. The author of one comment wrote, “The Kyrgyz agreed among themselves, got together, and within a day sent Bakiyev packing. Yes, people were injured, there were victims, but they achieved their goal, and kicked him out!”¹⁰

“After going through a stabilization period, Tajikistan has once again re-

turned to the crisis point it was at in the early 1990s, when open struggles between the central government and the regional elites spilled over into civil war,”¹¹ wrote journalist and analyst Sanobar Shermatova in 2010.

In 2010-2011, Rakhmon apparently realized (prompted by his survival instinct) that it would be dangerous to tighten the screws any further, all the more so with the country in such a difficult economic situation. According to the National Bank of Tajikistan, per capita income in 2009 came to \$879 as calculated at current price levels.¹² Tajikistan has 45 percent of its people living below the poverty line. There was a slight improvement in the economy in 2011, but this had practically no impact on living standards for most of the population.

In any event, in a hint of the regime’s new willingness to liberalize a little, it began dismantling the personality cult that had built up around Rakhmon. Photos and posters of Rakhmon disappeared from the streets in March 2011. Several rebels were amnestied at around the same time. In August 2011, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of Tajikistan’s independence, Rakhmon signed a law that made possible the biggest amnesty the country had seen yet: 15,000 prisoners were eligible under its provisions, of which around 4,000 were freed. Makhmad-said Abdullayev, speaker of the upper house of parliament and mayor

of Dushanbe, made a call to protect personal rights and act within the law. Rakhmon proposed removing articles 135 and 136 (slander and defamation) from the Criminal Code and including them in the Civil Code instead, which could be seen as opening the way to greater freedom of the press (however, on January 12, 2012, an attempt was made on the life of independent journalist and opposition figure Dododzhon Atovulloyev, though it is practically impossible to find out who exactly was behind this crime.)

Finally, in response to rising food prices in February 2011, Rakhmon gave the order to top up the market with stocks of buckwheat, rice, and flour from the country's strategic reserves. These, however, have only been half measures. Public discontent continues to grow and social tension still runs high. Dododzhon Atovulloyev said that the only way to change the current regime would be to "organize our own Tajik 'Tahrir.'"¹³

To replicate the mass protests on Cairo's main square that toppled Egyptian President Mubarak's regime in the spring of 2011, however, would be difficult, if not impossible. Rakhmon's regime does have its supporters, above all among the numerous bureaucrats, who in turn are all backed by their own clans. The president can count on the support of the region around his home town Kulyab, too. The Tajik drug

trafficking mafia, which includes a sizeable number of bureaucrats, is also happy enough with the status quo. Thus, if the opposition does succeed in organizing mass protests, they will encounter stiff resistance. The situation in this case would be more reminiscent of the confrontation just before the civil war began, when the so-called Islamic-democratic opposition gathered on Shakhidon, one of Dushanbe's two main squares, and the regime's supporters gathered on the other main square, Ozodi. Rather than leading to a painless regime change, a new confrontation could usher in a new civil war.

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Even if the opposition were successful, it is by no means clear who would come to power. The IRP, the regional clans, who feel slighted by Rakhmon and his team and are fed up with the Kulyab clan holding power, and the local drug mafias all have their eyes on power. A hypothetical victory of the opposition would not bring down the level of internal instability. The IRP saw its influence grow considerably in 2010-2012, and its support among

the public now surpasses the 5-10 percent that experts were giving it before. Islamist victories following the Arab revolutions in the Middle East have clearly played a part here. The IRP sees itself as their ideological ally and is ready to take on the responsibility of government once the authoritarian regime falls. The party's criticism of the regime has become noticeably stronger and more uncompromising in 2011-2012.

What impact on the situation in Tajikistan do outside actors have: China, Russia, the United States, and immediate neighbors, in particular Uzbekistan? None of these countries would want to see a sharp escalation of the situation in Tajikistan, not to mention the country's collapse. First, this would destabilize the entire Central Asian region; second, it could open the way for

reactions, and their presence could affect the situation in neighboring countries as well as in Russia.

Thus, no matter what the state of relations between outside actors and Rakhmon and his regime, no one is prepared to provide support to his opponents. Some experts say that Tajikistan "is trying to win itself the status of a Chinese province,"¹⁴ and Beijing is perfectly happy with this. Washington has been increasing financial aid to the Tajikistani government, incorporating it into its security strategy for the region. Neither the United States nor China have any interest in a potential "Tajik spring."

Russia, of course, by no means wants anything of the kind either. Moscow wants to keep Tajikistan within its sphere of influence by taking part in key projects there (especially energy projects) and providing military aid. The foundations for this military cooperation between the two countries were laid in the period of civil war, when Russia paid half the costs for defending the Tajik-Afghan border.¹⁵ This mutually advantageous cooperation played a big part in helping Rakhmon stay in power. Rakhmon was later able to count on the support, albeit tacit, of Russia's 201st Division, which remained in Tajikistan and became the backbone of the Russian military base established there in 2004.

After Moscow's decision to upgrade the base's arms and equip-

radical Islamists with ties to their ideological allies in Afghanistan to take the stage and turn the country into another base for international terrorism; and third, it would inevitably provoke a new flood of refugees streaming in different di-

Moscow wants to keep Tajikistan within its sphere of influence by taking part in key projects there (especially in energy) and providing military aid. Migration is the other big factor linking Tajikistan to Russia. One in three Tajik families has at least one family member working abroad, the vast majority of them in Russia.

ment, Russian military hardware worth an estimated \$1 billion will be handed over to Tajikistan, including 160 tanks (T-62, T-72), 140 armored personnel carriers, 169 infantry carrier vehicles, an artillery repair and maintenance complex, a portable surface-to-air missile Iгла, 30 Shilka and Osa air defense systems, and 4 helicopters.¹⁶ These weapons, though outdated, nonetheless provide great support for the regime in its fight against domestic opponents and can help to protect the borders, including by acting as “a deterrent in Tajik-Uzbek relations.”¹⁷

Migration is the other big factor linking Tajikistan to Russia. One in three Tajik families has at least one family member working abroad, the vast majority of them in Russia. According to the Tajikistan Migration Control Directorate, there were 1.032 million Tajiks in Russia at the end of 2011 (since the spring of 2012, a special newspaper for them, *Mukhodzhir*, even started coming out in Dushanbe.) In 2011, the migrants sent \$2.96 bln home, which came to 45.4 percent of Tajikistan's GDP.¹⁸

A conflict erupted between Russia and Tajikistan in 2011 over the detention and arrest of Russian pilot Vladimir Sadovnichy (who was arrested together with Estonian citizen Alexey Rudenko). The two were accused of smuggling aviation-related spare parts, illegally crossing the

border and violating international transport regulations. The pilot was sentenced to eight-and-a-half years in prison, which provoked an extremely negative reaction on behalf of Russian politicians (including President Medvedev) and fuelled nationalist sentiment in Russian society. Some State Duma deputies demanded that Russia deport Tajik migrants and introduce visas as a means of punishing Tajikistan.

No foreign actors – Russia, China, the United States, and Tajikistan's immediate neighbors, in particular Uzbekistan – would want to see a sharp escalation of the situation in Tajikistan, not to mention the country's collapse.

The tension abated after Rakhmon decided to release Sadovnichy and let him return home. Still, the fact that Moscow showed its willingness to use migration as a means of exerting pressure on Tajikistan will certainly have a negative impact on future relations between the two countries and force Dushanbe to put more emphasis on a multi-vector policy and the search for alternative partnerships.

What's more, the conflict over the Russian pilot's arrest came at a bad time for Moscow (in the second half of 2011, when the Kremlin was actively promoting the Customs Union and Eurasian Union projects and trying to engage Tajikistan as well). The authorities in

Dushanbe have barely even considered the possibility of joining these organizations at a high level and have so far only hinted at the hypothetical possibility that they might participate.

On the issue of Tajikistan joining the Customs Union, let alone the Eurasian Union, Tajik analysts also take into consideration Uzbekistan's negative attitude toward these projects, and think that it would not be particularly advantageous for Tajikistan to join both of these organizations if Uzbekistan is not also involved. Of course, Tajikistan's participation would remove obstacles in the way of migrants going to Russia and reduce the costs of energy imports, grain, and some other goods, but it would also deal a blow to cheap imports from China, Iran, and Turkey, and spell financial ruin for the businesspeople involved in trade with these countries. As Tajikistan's Foreign Minister Khamrokhon Zarifi said, "If Tajikistan were to join the Customs Union now the benefits would be insignificant."¹⁹ Nonetheless, Russia still hopes to see Tajikistan reach a positive decision with regard to the new forms of cooperation within the framework of these organizations.

Tajikistan will hold a presidential election in 2013. No one can say yet exactly what it will look like. Under the constitution, Rakhmon cannot stand for another

term in office, but the practice in the Central Asian countries is for their rulers to get around this law by adopting amendments to the constitution to allow them to stay in power. It is not yet known whether Rakhmon will take this road. Whatever the circumstances, if he does decide to relinquish the presidency to whomever it be, he will demand firm guarantees of security for himself and his relatives from his successor.

Another possibility would be to carry out a rotation along the lines of Russia's "tandem" solution, with the next president just filling the seat for Rakhmon, who would then return to office in seven years' time. This, however, is an unlikely scenario because the coming years in unstable Tajikistan could bring events that would cut Rakhmon and his clan out of power for good.

If events follow the constitution, Tajikistan will have a new president, who will have the job of tackling the problems left by his predecessor and making changes to the political system. We cannot say yet whether the new president will continue to bolster the authoritarian regime or will take the risk of at least partially drawing on Kyrgyzstan's reform experience.

The new president will have to act in two seemingly mutually exclusive directions: maintain a fragile stability, yet at the same time carry out reforms and fight corrup-

tion and the drug mafia. To undertake these two tasks simultaneously will be quite a challenge.

NOTES:

¹ “The demographic consequences of ethnic and regional conflicts in the CIS [“Demograficheskie posledstvia etnicheskikh i regionalnykh konfliktov v SNG”], *Population and Society*, no. 27 (April 1997); A. Niyazi, “Tajikistan: regional aspects of the conflict (1990s)” [“Tajikistan: Regionalnie aspekty konflikta (1990s)”], *Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in Eurasia*, Book 1: *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, (Moscow: Ves Mir, 1997), p. 52.

² A. Lyakhovsky and V. Nekrasov, *Citizen, politician and soldier*, (Moscow: 2007), p. 270.

³ M. Yanovskaya, “100th anniversary of the press gets journalists let off going to prison” [“Tajikistan: V chest 100-letia pechati zhurnalistov reshili ne sazhat”], <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=7308&print=1>.

⁴ S. Shermatova, “What is happening in Tajikistan and how should we view it?” [“Chto proiskhodit v Tajikistane i kak k etomu sleduyet otnositsia?”], <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6801>.

⁵ Reference to founder of the Hanafi school, 8-9th century theologian and jurist Abu Hanifa.

⁶ Some mosques closed for purely economic reasons, as well, when some communities, especially those in rural areas, could not raise the funds for their upkeep.

⁷ A. Dubnov, “Tajikistan: a new opposition for an old president” [“Tajikistan: Novaya oppozitsia staromu prezidentu”], *Rossia v globalnoy politike*, no. 2 (March-April 2011): pp. 134-137.

⁸ D. Sariyev, “Stable instability” [“Stabilnaya nestabilnost”], *Oazis*, no. 24 (164) (December, 2011).

⁹ <http://tjknews.com/?p=1497>.

¹⁰ <http://http://tjknews.com/?p=2060>.

¹¹ Shermatova, “What is happening?”

¹² *Tajikistan Country Report*, <http://www.gfmag.com/gdp-data-country-reports/165-tajikistan-gdp-country-report.html#axzz1qsiT82UH>.

¹³ <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=7260?print=1>.

¹⁴ M. Gusarov, “Acquired Tajik-deficiency syndrome” [“Sindrom priobretennogo tajikidefitsita”], Eurasia Center, February 23, 2011.

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¹⁵ R. Masov, *Current problems in the Tajik people's historiography and history* (Dushanbe: 2005) p. 227.

¹⁶ V. Georgiyev, "Tajikistan: Russian arms will make Rakhmonov's regime more effective" ["Tajikistan: Rossiiskoe oruzhie sdelayet rezhim Rakhmonova bolee deesposobnym"], <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=5396>.

¹⁷ A. Kazanstev, "The Russian military base in Tajikistan is needed above all for Tajikistan's own security" ["Rossiiskaya voyennaya baza v Tajikistane nuzhna dlya bezopasnosti prezhde vsego samogo Tajikistana"], Russian Council for International Affairs, <http://russiancouncil.ru/?id4=234>.

¹⁸ *Cross-Media* (A Euromoney Institutional Company), March 29, 2012. According to other estimates, Tajiks send home from \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion, which comes to 35-40 percent of the country's GDP.

¹⁹ D. Sariyev, "All possible alliances," ["Vse vozmozhnye soyuzy"], *Oazis*, no. 23 (163) (December 2011).

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