

Tajikistan

Capital: Dushanbe
Population: 8.2 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$2,500

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2015*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Electoral Process	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75
Civil Society	5.00	5.00	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50
Independent Media	6.25	6.25	6.00	6.00	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25
National Democratic Governance	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50
Local Democratic Governance	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50
Corruption	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Democracy Score	5.93	5.96	6.07	6.14	6.14	6.14	6.18	6.25	6.32	6.39

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tajikistan remains the poorest state in postcommunist Eurasia.¹ With 1–1.5 million citizens employed as migrant laborers abroad, it also has the most remittance-dependent economy in the world. Even as the economy shrank in Russia, where 95 percent of Tajik migrant laborers go for work, Tajikistan received approximately \$4 billion in remittances in 2014—the equivalent of 45 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).²

Following the fatal stabbing of a top security official in 2012, the government launched a weeks-long military offensive in the nominally autonomous region of Badakhshan, resulting in tens of civilian and military deaths. In 2014, a shootout between alleged drug dealers and police reignited protests in Khorog, Badakhshan's capital. Residents torched government buildings and at least four people were killed.

A “foreign agents” bill similar to Russia's 2012 legislation came before the parliament at the end of 2014, threatening the already restricted space for independent civil society activity in Tajikistan. In June, the detention of Canada-based Tajik academic Alexander Sodiqov, who had been conducting research on peace-building efforts in Badakhshan, provoked unprecedented international criticism of Tajikistan's government, leading to his eventual release. Independent media outlets endured sporadic blocking of various social media websites during the year.

With parliamentary elections set for early 2015, the government took every opportunity to smear and intimidate opposition political forces, particularly the Islamic Revival Party (IRP). Tajikistan's corrupt courts served to intimidate regime critics and egregious human rights abuses within detention facilities went unaddressed.

National Democratic Governance. Tajikistan's government continues to arbitrarily limit free speech, access to information, and the right to civic organization. In a sequel to the events of 2012, the state faced a violent crisis in the Badakhshan province in mid-2014. Throughout the year, members of the opposition IRP faced severe harassment that some connected to the upcoming March 2015 parliamentary elections. Critics speculate that the continued suppression of dissent, in conjunction with corruption and limited economic opportunities, may be increasing sympathy for radical Islamism, especially among Tajikistan's youth. *Tajikistan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.50.*

Electoral Process. President Emomali Rahmon and his People's Democratic Party (PDP) have dominated every election since Tajikistan gained independence. Observers of the most recent parliamentary (2010) and presidential (2013) elections

noted that both contests failed to meet basic democratic standards or offer a real choice among candidates. The votes were marred by irregularities and allegations of fraud, including widespread ballot-stuffing, proxy voting, intimidation and suspected elimination of opposing voices, and false tallies. No meaningful electoral reform took place in 2014. *Tajikistan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Civil Society. Civil society's ability to advocate for fundamental reforms to the sociopolitical structure of Tajikistan is limited by the project-based approach of Western donors and by the government's growing hostility to international and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In fall 2014, a bill nearly identical to Russia's "foreign agents" law was introduced in the Tajik parliament. Not long after the renewed unrest in Badakhshan, the State National Security Committee (GKNB) detained Canada-based Tajik scholar Alexander Sodiqov on suspicions of "subversion and espionage," releasing him five weeks later. *Tajikistan's rating for civil society declines from 6.25 to 6.50.*

Independent Media. Tajikistan's independent media outlets face libel lawsuits and harassment from the government and its security organs, and some journalists are thought to have left Tajikistan due to government pressure. In April, a Dushanbe court ordered the deputy editor of Tajikistan's largest independent newspaper, *Asia-Plus*, to pay a \$6,000 fine to three "intellectuals" who felt insulted by an article in which their names did not appear. Throughout 2014, the government used state television and social media to malign the opposition IRP. The authorities continued to periodically block access to independent social-networking and news websites. *Tajikistan's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Local Democratic Governance. Governors of provinces and districts, including the mayor of Dushanbe, are appointed by the president and remain in their posts for long periods of time, often enriching themselves via crony capitalism. Many Tajikistanis in rural areas are engaged in cotton farming, a de facto state-ruled practice that accrues wealth for monopoly intermediaries, many of which are led by the ruling elite. Land grabs and other corrupt practices by local governments are common, while the provision of basic services, such as health care, education, and electricity, remains pitifully inadequate. *Tajikistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.00.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Tajikistan's judicial, law-enforcement, and security apparatuses are deeply corrupt. Laws are selectively enforced and confession-based investigative and policing mechanisms are common. Torture remains widespread and goes unpunished in police stations, GKNB detention facilities, and penitentiaries. As the regime becomes increasingly intolerant of political pluralism and dissent, it relies on the full cooperation of the court system to neutralize perceived regime threats. In 2014, the lawyers of imprisoned opposition

figure Zaid Saidov were arrested on corruption charges and the Supreme Court declared the Moscow-based opposition movement Group 24 to be an “extremist organization.” As the judiciary repeatedly demonstrates its subservience to the executive branch and egregious violations of human rights and due process go unaddressed, *Tajikistan’s rating for judicial framework and independence declines from 6.25 to 6.50.*

Corruption. Tajikistan’s ubiquitous corruption showed no signs of lessening in 2014, despite reported improvements in the ease of doing business. President Rahmon continued to issue opportunities based on nepotism and clan membership, appointing his son, son-in-law, and nephew to potentially lucrative posts. *Tajikistan’s rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Outlook for 2015. Tajikistan enters the year with a number of potential troubles on the horizon. The decline of the Russian ruble will not only further reduce remittances—which dropped 5 percent in 2014—but also confine many unemployed young people to Tajikistan. The substantial reduction of foreign troops in Afghanistan planned for 2015 may also reinvigorate extremist groups in the region, some of which consist of Tajikistani and other Central Asian nationals with designs on their homelands. The steady but wide income gap between rich and poor will further alienate Tajikistan’s disenfranchised younger generation, nudging some toward extremism. As a result, small but deadly skirmishes in outlying regions are possible. Given the government’s growing determination to suppress all significant opposition voices, parliamentary elections in March will be among the least democratic and most fraudulent in Tajikistan’s postcommunist history, even if they are ostensibly validated by the presence of a large and expensive monitoring mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50

In a June 2014 public address commemorating the end of Tajikistan’s 1991–97 civil war, President Emomali Rahmon—in power since 1992—praised the “ethnic Tajik nation” but also reminded listeners that national unity in Tajikistan must reflect the needs and desires of *all* citizens, regardless of “religious affiliation, ethnicity, and [political] party.”³ Such rhetoric belies the regime’s contempt for democratic principles and its intolerance of views that challenge the entrenched supremacy of President Rahmon or his ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP).

For over two decades, the Rahmon regime has maintained a democratic façade while routinely stifling political debate through the use of pliant legislative and judicial bodies and an increasingly powerful secret police (the State National Security Committee, GKNB). Indeed, analysts note that the “suppression of dissent is one of the few areas in which the administration excels.”⁴ Meanwhile, widespread corruption undermines the development of small and medium enterprises, contributing to the country’s economic woes.⁵

Several members of the country’s largest opposition group, the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), were beaten, harassed, and imprisoned in 2014.⁶ Local authorities targeted IRP district and regional offices, raiding meetings, closing local offices, and using eminent domain claims to tear down offices. In April, unknown assailants attacked and beat Saidumar Husaini, one of IRP’s two parliamentary deputies and the first deputy chief of the party. In August, the IRP chair for the Badakhshan region, Saodatsho Adolatov, was sentenced to five years in prison for “inciting hatred” and accused of having “trained with the Taliban,” though no evidence for this charge was presented. State-controlled media also launched a smear campaign apparently aimed at discrediting IRP ahead of the March 2015 parliamentary elections (see Independent Media section).

Despite constant efforts to centralize power, the government’s control over some regions of the country remains tenuous. In May 2014, protests against police violence spiraled into clashes in Khorog, the capital of the autonomous Badakhshan province. Reportedly, members of OMON, a special police force dating back to the Soviet era, shot at three suspected drug traffickers and detained another—the brother of a local warlord; an angry crowd attempted to break into the police station and free the detainee.⁷ The crowd went on to set fire to several government buildings, including the police station, the provincial office of the prosecutor’s office, and the city court. Four people died in the ensuing riot, including one policeman.

Two years earlier, the government had launched a full-fledged military incursion into Badakhshan after the fatal stabbing of the regional head of the GKNB. Some

Western analysts interpreted the 2012 military operations and ensuing skirmishes, which resulted in tens of casualties, as part of “a turf war” between the authorities and local warlords over Badakhshan’s lucrative drug trade.⁸ Others noted that natives of Badakhshan, who are also called Pamirs, and whose language and religion are distinctive within Tajikistan, “see themselves as victims of a chauvinistic dictatorship that wants to suppress their culture.”⁹

In the aftermath of the May violence, Tajik law enforcement arrested a Canada-based doctoral student and Tajik national named Alexander Sodiqov, who had been in Khorog researching peace-building efforts there (see Civil Society section). Sodiqov’s detention on charges of espionage unleashed a maelstrom of international criticism and completely overshadowed the broader aims of a long-planned diplomatic visit of top Tajik officials to the UK, two weeks later.¹⁰ In the end, the authorities caved to massive international pressure and freed Sodiqov on 22 July.

Tajikistan’s relatively high annual macroeconomic growth (which averaged 6.7 percent in 2010–14)¹¹ conceals the weakness of a domestic economy that relies heavily on remittances from an estimated 1–1.5 million Tajik citizens working abroad. Western sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea took a toll on the value of the Russian ruble in 2014, reducing the income of Tajik migrant laborers, most of whom seek work in Russia. Given its economic, political and historical ties to Moscow, after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Tajikistan, like its Central Asian neighbors, declined to participate in the March 2014 United Nations General Assembly vote affirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

For years, observers have argued that political apathy in Tajikistan is widespread and unlikely to give way to active engagement or mobilization.¹² These days, it seems that smothered economic and political opportunities, in conjunction with a weak and ineffectual opposition, may be gradually changing and even radicalizing public attitudes. One analyst claims that a growing number of Tajikistanis are “losing faith in fair elections and political change” and that a rising number of youths lean towards “a more radical opposition, closer to a fundamental interpretation of political Islam than to moderate Islamo-nationalism.”¹³

Electoral Process

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75

The regime’s propaganda machine works tirelessly to ensure that President Rahmon and the PDP are the only political forces with name recognition or credibility on election day. Not satisfied with these odds, the authorities have further employed brutal intimidation tactics, including imprisonment, beatings, and the suspected elimination of at least one regime opponent. Tajikistan’s next parliamentary elections are scheduled for March 2015.

Election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported that Tajikistan’s last parliamentary elections in 2010

“failed to meet many key OSCE commitments [and] other international standards for democratic elections” and one observer described the vote as “a badly staged drama.”¹⁴ In addition to the incumbent administration’s abuse of state resources and dominance of state media, the elections were marred by widespread proxy voting, suspected ballot stuffing, and sporadic intimidation of candidates. Four years later, nearly identical abuses and “significant shortcomings”¹⁵ marked the November 2013 presidential election, with an overall ballot count that international monitors deemed “bad” or “very bad” in about one-third of polling stations.¹⁶ Tajikistan’s Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER), whose members are appointed by the president, reported that 84 percent of voters had cast their ballots for the incumbent. Rahmon’s four nominal rivals “gracefully conceded defeat [while] calling the elections fair.”¹⁷

The 2010 and 2013 elections were both preceded by increased intimidation and brutality against opposition forces. Salimboy Shamsiddinov, the leader of Khatlon’s Uzbek community and an outspoken government critic on minority rights, disappeared mysteriously in March 2013 before his decomposed body reportedly washed up on the shores of the Amu River in Uzbekistan. Many suspect he was killed by Tajikistan’s GKNB (formerly the KGB), which has a history of utilizing intimidation, kidnappings, torture, and extrajudicial executions.¹⁸ In the weeks prior to his disappearance, Shamsiddinov had participated in the “Initiative group on reform of the presidential election law” and appealed to ethnic Uzbek Tajikistanis to cast votes for the leader of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Rahmatillo Zoirov, were he to be a candidate in the 2013 presidential race.¹⁹

Prominent businessman and former industry minister Zaid Saidov—who, along with a group of well-known figures, formed the still-unregistered New Tajikistan Party (NTP) in April 2013—was also neutralized ahead of the 2013 elections. Convicted of fraud, rape, and polygamy, Saidov received 26 years in prison and had millions of dollars expropriated from him by the state.²⁰

Despite mounting evidence that elections in Tajikistan are mere window-dressing for authoritarian rule, the OSCE intends to send a large contingent of election observers to supervise the March 2015 parliamentary elections. In a November 2014 speech, President Rahmon called the upcoming elections “an important factor in consolidating national unity, the foundation of the people of Tajikistan and means to increase the country’s reputation as a democratic, law-abiding and secular state.”²¹ Some analysts have argued that the mere presence of international observers has provided a form of legitimacy for Rahmon’s regime.²²

On the whole, Tajikistan’s government seems untroubled by the prospect of having its elections scrutinized by western observers, who tend to use mild, bureaucratic language and focus primarily on technical issues. However, since Ukraine’s Euromaidan movement successfully ousted authoritarian leader Viktor Yanukovich, some government authorities have become more openly hostile to evaluations by the OSCE and other international organizations. Shukurjon Zuhurov, the speaker of the lower house of Tajikistan’s parliament, said of the OSCE in an April 2014 parliamentary session: “Wherever they have had their hands, there has

never been peace or democracy.” Zuhurov further questioned Tajikistan’s normative commitments under the OSCE: “[L]et’s determine what our own values are [...] on the road to democracy.”²³

Civil Society

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
5.00	5.00	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50

Contemporary civil society in Tajikistan is a hybrid of pre-and-post-Soviet social mechanisms. “Communal” civil society dates back to pre-Soviet Central Asian traditions, such as *hasbar* (community volunteer labor), the *choikhona* (teahouse), and the *mahalla* (neighborhood). Soviet authorities maintained and encouraged select aspects of these mechanisms for discourse, community-building, and conflict-mitigation in the service of the state. Neoliberal civil society emerged in Central Asia in the early 1990s with the arrival of international donors interested in providing emergency assistance to war-torn Tajikistan and promoting democracy and capitalism through Western-style NGOs.²⁴

Today, Tajikistan has over 2,700 NGOs,²⁵ but few of these have any real impact on society and even fewer of them work on issues that might be considered politically sensitive. For this, analysts blame NGOs’ financial dependence on Western peace-building and development projects, most of which target key urban areas instead of tackling the root causes of underdevelopment.²⁶ One expert described civil society in Tajikistan as “virtual, in that it is publically practiced according to the technocratic procedures demanded by external sponsors.”²⁷ In many cases, projects themselves, and not sociopolitical change, have become the *de facto* objective of international organizations and Western-funded NGOs in Tajikistan—a phenomenon known as “projectosis.”²⁸ Survival of civil society initiatives has become primarily a function of availability of funding, rather than the effectiveness or relevance of organizations’ activities.²⁹

The other major obstacle to meaningful civil society activity is the current political atmosphere, in which criticism of the status quo is increasingly dangerous. Local NGOs’ almost inaudible response to the detention of Canada-based Tajik researcher Alexander Sodiqov in June 2014—especially when contrasted to the sustained and united reaction from international actors—is a telling illustration of local groups’ reluctance to engage on politically sensitive issues.

The few progressive civil society groups to engage with sensitive sociopolitical issues in recent years have paid a high price for their activism. In 2012, the authorities shut down the Association of Young Lawyers (Amparo) over alleged problems with its registration. The association had advocated for human rights issues and spoke out against abuse of military conscripts. Observers concur that the government’s case used to shut down Amparo was “politically motivated and devoid of substance.”³⁰

The detention of Sodiqov, a PhD student, on suspicion of espionage was itself a landmark event in Tajikistan, signaling a new level of paranoia on the part of

the authorities. Sodiqov was detained during a meeting with the opposition figure Alim Sherzamonov in Khorog. Despite substantial evidence that Sodiqov was a summer employee of the University of Exeter doing research funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council, the GKNB insisted he was complicit in “subversion and espionage” at behest of a “foreign country.”³¹

After Sodiqov’s detention, former defense minister Sherali Khayrulloev, GKNB chief Saimumin Yatimov, and the chairman of the lower house of parliament, Shukurjon Zuhurov, all made statements alleging that international organizations and unnamed governments were seeking to destabilize Tajikistan, using local NGOs as agents. Echoing rhetoric used by authoritarian regimes throughout Eurasia in recent years, Yatimov declared that “some NGOs working under aegis of international organizations threaten [Tajikistan’s] security.”³²

In the fall, the government prepared a new draft of the Law on Public Associations, intended to protect local NGOs from falling victim to the political machinations of foreign donors. The bill closely resembles Russia’s 2012 “foreign agents” law, which requires government preapproval of all foreign-sourced expenditures by NGOs.³³ In September, the Council of *Ulema* (Muslim clerics), a progovernment body, issued a *fatva* (religious decree) against “cooperation with domestic and foreign groups, media and parties, whose aim is to destabilize the country.” SDP leader Zoirov called the *fatva* illegal, contrary to the country’s secular nature, and contrary to its laws on NGOs and freedom of media.³⁴

Controlling religious worship remains a priority for the state. Since the adoption of a 2009 law on religion, Islamic religious education of any kind is illegal without explicit state permission; only one *madrassa* (Islamic school) is currently allowed to function in Tajikistan.³⁵ In 2014, a number of unregistered home madrasas were closed. In addition, the government made imams (mosque preachers) state employees, issuing them monthly salaries and standard uniforms.³⁶

The ministries of culture and education focus their efforts on preventing young people from attending mosque and discouraging them from listening to rock or rap music, which they claim “promote violence and immorality” and “do not conform to the culture of [the] nation.”³⁷ Meanwhile, Tajikistan’s public education system continues to suffer from overcrowded and dilapidated facilities, unqualified and underpaid teachers, and the informal requirement that students pay to attend class or pass exams.

Independent Media

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.25	6.25	6.00	6.00	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25

International watchdogs rank Tajikistan’s media environment as the second freest in Central Asia after Kyrgyzstan’s. The government controls most printing presses, newsprint supplies, and broadcasting facilities. The broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television stations that praise the government and deny

coverage to independent or opposition points of view—though many households do have access to foreign (mainly Russian) TV channels through their satellite dishes. The authorities also block some critical websites and online news outlets. Independent newspapers like *Faraj* or *Asia-Plus* are mostly popular and available in urban areas, as are some foreign media, especially the U.S.–funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which is primarily accessed through the internet.

Journalists in Tajikistan are inadequately trained and practice a high level of self-censorship. Insulting the president or a public official is criminal offense, while regular defamation and libel fall under the civil code. In April 2014, an appeals court in Dushanbe fined the deputy editor of *Asia-Plus*, Olga Tutubalina, approximately \$6,000 for allegedly insulting three Tajik intellectuals. Tutubalina had written an article criticizing Tajikistan's intelligentsia, using the example of Bozor Sobir, a poet and former Tajik dissident who had become a fervent Rahmon supporter and was about to return to Tajikistan at the personal invitation of the president after 20 years in the U.S.. Tutubalina opened her article by quoting a line from Vladimir Lenin's 1919 letter to Maxim Gorky: "Intellectuals are not the nation's brains, they are its shit." The names of the three plaintiffs in the case against Tutubalina were never mentioned in the article.³⁸ Reporters Without Borders called the court's verdict "absurd" and "a grave threat to independent journalism in Tajikistan."³⁹

In another example of media censorship via court ruling, the editors of the newspaper *Nigoh* (Look) were legally barred from publishing material critical of Tojiksodirotbank, one of Tajikistan's largest banks.⁴⁰ There are indications that a few prominent journalists left Tajikistan in 2014 as a result of these kinds of lawsuits, as well as threats and intimidation by security organs.

Despite the associated risks, Tajikistan's independent outlets published a number of investigative articles in 2014 that focused on delicate issues, such as the lives of sexual minorities in Tajikistan, the press-gang of young men into military service, and the cruel treatment of prostitutes by the police. During the summer, a number of independent outlets—chief among them *Asia-Plus*—actively covered the GKNB's detention of Alexander Sodiqov.⁴¹

Some independent TV channels are broadcast regionally. However, the State Committee on Television and Radio refuses to issue television licenses to independent news agencies like *Asia-Plus*, nor to opposition parties such as the IRP. The state-run TV channels primarily broadcast pro-governmental news, entertainment, and patriotic programs, and practically never allot time for opposition voices. Many, especially in urban areas, tune into Russian-language satellite TV, which they find more objective, interesting, and entertaining than local media.

As the internet becomes a popular venue for debate on politically sensitive topics, the government increasingly seeks to disrupt or infiltrate the dissemination of information online. In June, in reaction to the blocking of over 200 news and social media websites, the OSCE, RSF, and the Tajik Association of Journalists urged the government to cease its "violations of Tajik citizens' rights to receive information." The government denied any involvement in the disruptions, attributing them to "possible technical problems."⁴² In July, the Russian social network Odnoklasniki

(probably the most popular website in Tajikistan) was temporarily blocked after reports that it was being used to recruit Tajikistanis into the ongoing Islamic State insurgency in Syria and Iraq.⁴³

Several popular social networking and news websites were blocked for a week following speculations of planned antigovernment protests in October. Group 24, a small, Moscow-based opposition movement headed by exiled businessman Umarali Quvvatov, used Facebook to call for antigovernment protests.⁴⁴ The authorities treated the announcement as a serious threat: the Supreme Court formally designated Group 24 as an “extremist” organization and the government placed security forces on alert in major urban areas. In addition to blocking websites, the authorities temporarily suspended SMS services before and on the date of the proposed demonstration. A Tajikistani observer in Moscow noted that the government’s heavy-handed reaction to Group 24 had served as “free publicity” for the group and created a “huge information buzz,” despite the non-event of 10 October.⁴⁵ One month later, in Moscow, there was an attempt on the life of Maqsd Ibromimov, leader of the Tajik Youth for Revival of Tajikistan, a newly established opposition group allied with Group 24.⁴⁶

The government itself appeared to be making use of social media in March 2014, as pornographic videos recorded with hidden cameras and showing alleged IRP members in compromising acts began surfacing on YouTube and even state television.⁴⁷ A few months earlier, state television had also alleged that a faith healer convicted of child rape in Isfara was an IRP member. Observers explained the release of these materials as a politically motivated smear campaign to discredit the IRP—whose members pride themselves on their conservatism and Islamic piety—ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections.⁴⁸

Local Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00

Tajikistan is divided into four administrative provinces (*viloyats*) with limited autonomy. These provinces are further divided into 58 districts (*nohiyas*) and 406 municipalities (*jamoats*), in addition to numerous towns and villages. Suhrob Sharipov, a parliamentary deputy from the ruling PDP, has advocated for the abolition of the viloyat structure, a relic of the Soviet era that Sharipov claims prevent the creation of a strong unified state.⁴⁹

Contemporary center-periphery relations in Tajikistan still reflect the “stability of cadres” of the Soviet 1960s and 70s, when officials served in the same positions for many years, creating extensive patronage networks that exist to this day.⁵⁰ Governors of provinces and districts, all of whom are appointed directly by the president, normally keep their jobs for long periods, and many enrich themselves in the process. The mayor of Dushanbe, Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev, for example, has held his post for 19 years. His administration is notorious for large-scale land

grabs and nontransparent financial transactions, as well as cutting down hundreds of ninety-year-old *chenar* shade trees.

About 70 percent of Tajikistan's residents live in rural areas and many of them engage in cotton farming. Until the mid-1990s, cotton farming was still organized in a system of collective and state-owned farms, but privatization between 1996 and 2004 led to the formation of thousands of *dehqon* (peasant) farms. The process of privatization and land reform has been contaminated by corruption and favoritism, leading one critic to label Tajikistan a "case study of post-Soviet crony capitalism."⁵¹ In many instances, the Soviet agriculture system has only changed nominally, as the overall agricultural scheme of the country is still de facto centrally planned.

Despite a 2009 Freedom-to-Farm law that supposedly guaranteed the right of farmers to grow the crop of their choice, residents of the country's best-irrigated lands have mostly been forced into cotton, or "white gold," cultivation. Cotton is the second-largest export of Tajikistan, outstripped only by aluminum. Raw cotton production in 2014 was reported at 373,000 metric tons, a drop of 5 percent compared to 2013. Given global glut and decreased demand, Tajikistan exported nearly 25 percent less cotton fiber in 2014 than in the previous year, with a corresponding 30 percent drop in export earnings (from approximately \$190 million to \$132 million).⁵²

The financial benefits of cotton farming in Tajikistan largely favor the investment-monopoly intermediary firms that act as loan sharks, providing agronomic inputs to the farmers at inflated prices and reserving the right to purchase the year's raw cotton harvest at dirt-cheap prices. Every year, unemployment and inadequate income drive tens of thousands of people (mostly young men) into temporary-to-permanent migration, primarily to Russia, as a means of supporting their families in Tajikistan.

Cotton monoculture is a key reason why 70 percent of the food consumed in Tajikistan is imported.⁵³ Tajikistan produces roughly half of its wheat needs—around 1.2 million tons. Internal production of wheat in 2014 reached a reported 621,800 tons, which is nearly identical to 2013's yield.⁵⁴ The cotton monoculture in Central Asia as a whole has devastated the environment, as evidenced by the near-dead Aral Sea, which was one of the largest lakes in the world until only a few decades ago.

Outlying regions also endure a disproportionate share of Tajikistan's energy shortages. Each winter, as many as 6 million Tajikistanis experience extended blackouts. In 2014, everyone living outside the urban centers of Dushanbe, Kulob, and Khujand received only a few hours of electricity per day from October on. Meanwhile, Tajikistan exported over a billion kilowatt-hours of electricity to neighboring Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁵

A social and environmental assessment released by the World Bank in September blessed the government's plans for Roghun, a hydroelectricity power plant whose construction will entail building the highest dam in the world (projected at 335 meters).⁵⁶ Planners claim that Roghun will not only solve Tajikistan's energy crisis, but also generate billions of dollars in export revenues. Tajikistani citizens purchased

around \$180 million in Roghun shares in 2010—many public sector employees and students were forced to do so—but the government has been unable to generate the remainder of the estimated \$5 billion necessary for the plant’s construction.

Energy shortages also affect the education sector. Parents are required to pay informal fees for coal and gas to keep their children’s classrooms heated during the winter months.⁵⁷ Despite the central government’s mistrust of international organizations and NGOs, many local authorities in outlying areas are happy to see services such as health or legal assistance offered to the local population by non-state actors, given their own funding and resource shortages.

Judicial Framework and Independence

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50

The realities of human rights and justice in Tajikistan are 180 degrees removed from government leadership’s frequently declared commitment to the “rights and liberties of the individual.”⁵⁸ Legal and judicial reforms implemented in past years, such as improvements to the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), have been largely pro forma. The country’s leadership rarely acknowledges the persistence or deterioration of serious human rights problems in the country. Many judges are corrupt and will provide a favorable verdict based on political pressure or bribes.

Law enforcement bodies and the court system frequently target opposition figures and other individuals who challenge Tajikistan’s political and economic elite. In October, the Supreme Court declared the Moscow-based opposition movement Group 24 to be an “extremist organization.” Zaid Saidov, who founded a new but unregistered political party ahead of the 2013 presidential elections, was arrested by Tajikistan’s anticorruption agency within one month of announcing his party’s intent to launch. In a trial that was closed to the public—and in which, according to Saidov’s lawyers, the judge denied over 50 trial motions on evidentiary issues raised by the defense—Saidov was convicted on five charges ranging from polygamy to bribery.⁵⁹ SDP leader Zoirov called the Supreme Court’s verdict and sentence “preplanned” proof that the court “lacks independence” and “practices larceny.”⁶⁰ Prominent journalist Daler Ghufonov wrote that by convicting Saidov and ensuring the demise of the New Tajikistan Party (NTP), the authorities were “... killing two birds with one [stone] ... eliminating a political threat and taking over his commercial interests.”⁶¹

In 2014, the authorities went after Saidov’s lawyers, Fakhridin Zokirov and Shuhrat Qudratov, both of whom were arrested and tried on corruption charges.⁶² Zokirov was released after eight months, while Qudratov—a well-known human rights defender who is also the deputy head of the SDP—remained on trial at year’s end.

Tajikistan employs a confession-based investigative and policing system, rather than one in which legal outcomes are based on actual evidence. Law enforcement

and security agencies regularly use intimidation, abuse, and torture to extract “proof” of wrongdoing.⁶³ A 2012 report by the United Nations Committee Against Torture noted “numerous and consistent allegations [...] of routine use of torture and ill-treatment of suspects,” which take place “primarily during the first hours of interrogation in police custody as well as in temporary and pre-trial detention facilities” run by Tajikistan’s notorious GKNB and the Anti-Organized Crime Police (a.k.a. “Division Six”).⁶⁴ In May 2014, four defendants who had been held by Division Six in the Vahdat district near Dushanbe told the court that their confession had been extracted through torture that included the use of beatings, boiling water, and electrocution.⁶⁵

Judges routinely dismiss torture allegations, while fear of reprisal prevents most people who have been abused by police, investigators, or prison staff from filing complaints at all. Access to counsel is allowed “from the moment of arrest” under Tajikistan’s CPC (Articles 22 and 49), but in practice access is “authorized by the investigator, prosecutor or the judge and not allowed simply as a matter of right.”⁶⁶ The need to obtain extralegal permission from “certain police inspectors” to visit one’s client has become “the norm,” according to a 2013 report by a coalition of Tajik NGOs.⁶⁷ While the law does not restrict the length or number of attorney-client meetings, many defendants see their lawyer for the first time during trial.

In May, President Rahmon and the parliament extended the tenure of Zarif Alizoda, the country’s first Human Rights Ombudsman, who was first appointed in 2009. Despite his expertise, Alizoda is a known political stooge who lacks independence from the executive branch and avoids serious investigations of individual human rights cases, especially when the suspected culprit is the state. Faiziniso Vohidova, a prominent Tajik lawyer, called the extension of Alizoda’s term “a big mistake.”⁶⁸ She further observed: “I have no trust and hope in this organ and its leadership to do anything of importance vis-à-vis [...] human rights and liberties.”⁶⁹ According to another prominent lawyer, Abduqayyum Yusupov, “the hopes that the civil society and the international community had for the formation of [the Ombudsman] institution have vanished,” given Alizoda’s track record so far.⁷⁰ During the year, the government also continued to deny the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to the country’s prisons and failed to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT).

In September, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Tajikistan’s post-Soviet constitution, the government approved a large-scale prisoner amnesty, its sixteenth in 23 years, whereby it planned to free 10,000 (out of 13,000) detainees from prisons and special facilities.⁷¹ Prisons remain under the management of their longtime director, Lieutenant General Izzatullo Sharipov, a relative of President Rahmon and an individual that a U.S. Embassy memo describes as “a notorious former warlord rumored to be both corrupt and cruel” and “involved in narcotics trafficking.”⁷² There is genuine suspicion that the 19 most important prisons in Tajikistan are “collectively managed as a lucrative pyramidal fiefdom” under Sharipov. Penitentiary management uses prisoner amnesties as profit-making

opportunities. Fattoh Saidov, the head of Tajikistan’s State Financial Control and Anticorruption Agency, reported that “nearly all of the prisoners amnestied in 2009 had to pay bribes” for their releases.⁷³ In 2014, the authorities initially granted amnesty to Firuz Kholiqzoda, an assistant to a Dushanbe district prosecutor, prior to his trial, despite strong evidence that he killed a street sweeper in a September hit-and-run accident.⁷⁴

Tajikistan’s judicial and law enforcement systems have additionally failed to investigate incidents of mysterious deaths and disappearances, which many suspect are linked to security agencies. In 2011, the rebel leader Alovuddin “Bedaki” Davlatov and up to seven of his followers were allegedly detained, tortured, and extrajudicially executed by GKNB agents, although the government (as well as the OSCE) reported that the men had died in a gun battle with government troops.⁷⁵ During the 2012 Khorog protests, a regional representative of IRP, Sabzali Mamadrizoev, was abducted, tortured, and killed. Independent observers blamed the security forces for his killing.⁷⁶

Corruption

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25

Tajikistan consistently ranks poorly on all global surveys measuring corruption and related indicators.⁷⁷ On a day-to-day basis, corruption is present at all levels of society. Nepotism, cronyism, extortion, and bribe-seeking by government officials remained pervasive in 2014. Respondents to a 2010 UN-funded survey said they found law enforcement to be the most corrupt public institution, followed by the universities and hospitals.⁷⁸

Tajik authorities have a talent for turning new laws and regulations into opportunities for extortion. A typical example is the 2007 Law on Traditions, Celebrations and Ceremonies, which allows anticorruption inspectors to turn up unannounced at wedding receptions and impose fines of up to \$800 “for cooking too much rice” or hosting guests in excess of the 150-person limit.⁷⁹

Predatory behavior of this kind is the norm in Tajikistan, as are nepotism and cronyism.⁸⁰ The country’s broad domestic market and foreign trade are controlled by the president’s familial and Kulobi clan networks. Government posts, especially those related to taxation or trade, are particularly lucrative. In 2013, President Rahmon appointed his son Rustam Emomali as the head of the State Customs Service; in 2014, he installed his son-in-law Ashraf Gulov and his nephew Siroj Gulmurodov to head the audit office in the State Customs Service and the Khatlon province’s customs service, respectively.⁸¹

Roughly one-third of Tajikistan’s GDP comes from drug trafficking (mostly in heroin).⁸² By comparison, “narco-states” like Columbia and Afghanistan depend on the drug trade for around 1 percent and 15 percent of GDP, respectively.⁸³ Afghanistan, which produces 90 percent of the global opium supply, shares a

1,350-kilometer border with Tajikistan. The region's mountainous and porous terrain, which is not easily policed; poverty; and "systematic collusion"⁸⁴ between organized criminal entities and the ruling elite have all made Tajikistan part of "a sophisticated supply chain [of drug trafficking] that begins in the remote Afghan poppy fields and stretches through a network of heroin cooks, smugglers, and corrupt officials" on the way to lucrative markets in Russia and western Europe.⁸⁵

Cases of high-level corruption are rarely pursued unless they involve individuals who have lost favor with the president or challenged his power base. For example, corruption allegations implicating the former head of the National Bank of Tajikistan, Murodali Alimardonov—as substantiated by a 2009 audit by Ernst and Young—have been completely ignored.⁸⁶ However, in October 2014, a secretary of the High Economic Court, Azimjon Asrorov, was detained on suspicion of having accepted a \$52,000 bribe,⁸⁷ and, in December, the head of the Economic Court of Dushanbe, Rahim Sharifzoda, was arrested for allegedly accepting \$7,000 in exchange for a favorable ruling.⁸⁸ Normally, however, the government's periodic corruption cases target low- and mid-level officials.

According to Sebastien Peyrouse, a professor at the George Washington University, countering the drug trade and other forms of corruption in Central Asia cannot be achieved through "physical means," such as material aid and training, alone. The solution, he argues, is "political in nature," as leaders in these countries lack the will to fight against corruption.⁸⁹ Alimardonov, for example, was never prosecuted, and currently serves as President Rahmon's deputy prime minister in charge of agriculture. At the same time, corruption allegations are sometimes used to discredit or neutralize the political opposition, as in the case of Zaid Saidov and his lawyers.

The World Bank's *Doing Business 2015*—which ranks Tajikistan 166 out of 189 countries—notes that businesses in Tajikistan are required to fill out 11 forms to export goods and 12 to import them, while "administrative and other fees" can add up to \$10,650. In addition to discouraging entrepreneurship and foreign investment, such bureaucratic hurdles create ample opportunity for corruption in Tajikistan's civil service. In Hong Kong, to take one counterexample, there are only three documents required for cross-border trading, and fees amount to less than \$600.⁹⁰ On a positive note, the World Bank report lists Tajikistan among the top 10 states that, in 2014, "improved the most in performance" for the categories of starting a business, acquiring construction permits, access to credit, and the payment of taxes.⁹¹

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