

Geopolitics versus Democracy in Tajikistan

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Abstract: The convergence of international attention on Central Asia in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks offered hope for Tajikistan's fragile democracy. Washington's commitment to enhancing civil society and democratic rule was cause for celebration among the opposition activists. This was a peculiar experience as the Islamic Renaissance Party has been a mainstay of the opposition movement. Tajikistan is the only Central Asian republic that has allowed the open political engagement of an Islamic party. This has been a novel, albeit difficult experiment. But the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and ongoing security concerns appear to have diverted Washington's attention from Tajikistan's democratic state building. The United States has edged toward a policy aimed at preserving the status quo for fear of destabilizing the region. This policy is not dissimilar to that of Russia. Consequently, the prospects of an external boost to Tajikistan's novel democratic experiment are fading fast.

Key words: democracy, geopolitics, Islamic Renaissance Party, Tajikistan, U.S. policy

In December 2002, a year after the launch of the war on terror and the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan, a regional newspaper in Tajikistan's northern province invoked a folkloric tale to explain U.S. behavior in Tajikistan. This was a tale of neighborly relations and abuse of trust. Mula Nasreddin, the famous wise man/fool of Central Asian folklore, had turned to his neighbor for help to protect his home from robbers. The neighbor cheerfully agreed and stayed in Mula's home to fend off robbers. But after a while the neighbor realized that Mula's house was much better than his own and decided to stay even though the thieves had left. The editor of *Sugd* proceeded to remind the readers that this would not be the fate of Tajikistan. The United States had no need to overstay its welcome in Tajikistan and behave like an unscrupulous neighbor because it had all the resources it needed.¹

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The editor may have been correct in his the assessment since the United States has not tried to station troops in Tajikistan and effectively scaled down helicopter flights from the southern city of Kulob in mid-2002. Even after neighboring Uzbekistan evicted U.S. troops from Karshi-Khanabad air base in 2005, Washington did not approach Dushanbe for military base access. The absence of a U.S. military presence, however, does not equate with the absence of U.S. strategic interests in Tajikistan. The September 11 attacks and the war on terror have changed the geopolitical landscape. Tajikistan is no longer a remote corner of the post-Soviet zone, but a key piece in the large jigsaw that makes up U.S. defense policy, announced by President George W. Bush in September 2002. The Bush doctrine of projecting U.S. power beyond American borders to meet emerging or established threats to U.S. interests, dubbed the policy of preemption, is particularly concerned with weak and unstable states that could serve as safe havens for terrorist activity. Afghanistan had been one such state and Tajikistan was in danger of sliding in that direction. The U.S. Department of Defense Review in October 2001 identified Central Asia as an "arc of instability,"²² with the unmistakable conclusion that the United States had every reason to be involved in the region. It was precisely this line of thought that concerned Moscow, as Washington seemed to be making a qualitative break with the past practice of abandoning Central Asia to Russia's sphere of influence.

The heightened level of international interest in Tajikistan adds a new dimension to the democratic experiment there. Despite reservations about the military operation in neighboring Afghanistan, Tajik opposition parties are cautiously optimistic about the U.S. role in prodding Tajikistan along the democratization path. This optimism came on the heel of growing frustration with the slow pace of the move toward political pluralism, and recovery from the civil war.

This article examines the intersection of U.S. geostrategic interests in Tajikistan and the painful political transition there. It explores the commonplace view that Washington is a liberalizing influence on Tajikistan and beyond, against the background of immediate security concerns that occupy U.S. policymakers. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the drug trade across the Tajik-Afghan border present Washington with urgent challenges. Should the United States help consolidate the incumbent regime in Dushanbe to fend off security risks, or should it push for radical political reforms to help Tajikistan make a clean break with its authoritarian past? Noting that repressive measures against domestic discontent is often counterproductive and leads to international security problems, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argues that democratic systems are the best defense against radicalism. Yet, the U.S. record in Tajikistan is ambiguous. The two competing agendas on immediate security concerns and long-term stability and democratic prosperity have marred U.S. policy, leaving behind a questionable record.

Tajikistan's democratic experiment is also influenced by other international actors. Russia, and to some extent the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), are important players in the domestic affairs of Tajikistan and the prospects of entrenching democracy. For that reason, this article explores

the democratization process in Tajikistan in relation to the convergence of international attention on Central Asia, examining the dynamics of international and domestic politics in relation to democratic governance.

The 1992–97 civil war, which sharpened regional divisions and brought the significant role of regional and personal affiliations to the fore, shaped Tajikistan's political landscape. On the eve of the Soviet collapse, the Islamic Renaissance Party (NIT) and the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (HDT), which drew significant support from Garm and Qurqhonteppe as well as the intelligentsia in Dushanbe, challenged the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party (HKT), which was closely aligned with the regional leadership in northern Leninabad. In the civil war that erupted in May 1992, the Leninabadi leadership managed to use its links with local leaders in Kulob to mount an effective military challenge to the coalition of the NIT/HDT forces (see figure 1).

The Kulobi-based Popular Front, under the leadership of Emomali Rakhmanov, launched a successful campaign to dislodge the opposition from Dushanbe in December 1992. Rakhmanov has been the head of state since then, first as the chairman of the Supreme Soviet (1992–94), and then as president after the reintroduction of the presidential post in November 1994. Once in power, Rakhmanov consolidated his position by appointing loyal figures from Kulob to key positions and gradually eroding the traditional hegemony of the Leninabadi elite. The institutional mechanism for this shift in the political leadership was the evolution of the Popular Front into the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (HDKT), which continues to dominate national politics. The presidential election in 1994 was the turning point in the demise of the Leninabadi leadership as Abdulmalik Abdulanov, a leading figure from the north with cabinet experience, was defeated and subsequently charged with embezzlement, effectively barring him from any future opportunity to run in future elections. Leninabad was further marginalized when it was excluded from peace talks between the (Kulobi-dominated) government and opposition parties. With this shift in the leadership, the HKT was brushed aside by the HDKT and relegated to a position of (loyal) opposition.³

The peace process, which culminated in the formal conclusion of the civil war (1997) and the registration of the NIT and the HDT, established a political system that was unique in Central Asia. Tajikistan became the only Central Asian state to allow a political Islamic party to operate within the constitutional framework. A host of other political parties have also taken advantage of the opening-up of the political sphere to mobilize and stake a claim on the political landscape. There has been no shortage of formal opportunities for such activism as Tajikistan held two constitutional referendums (1999 and 2003), three parliamentary elections (1998, 2000, and 2005), and two presidential elections (1994 and 1999) in the space of thirteen years (1992–2005). Yet there are serious questions regarding the democratic integrity of the system. For example, when the 2003 referendum reintroduced the two-term presidency, it was widely seen as giving Rakhmanov the opportunity to rule until 2020.⁴

Reports of systematic constitutional contortions in favor of the ruling regime and highly questionable methods to limit the mobilization capacity of opposition parties

cast a shadow on Tajikistan's democratization trajectory. Fareed Zakaria, writing on the democratic experiment in the Middle East, argues that electoral democracy is a necessary but not a sufficient measure of success.⁵ Constitutional guarantees for individual and civil liberties, Zakaria purports, are critical to the democratization process. Without such guarantees, the system would be vulnerable to abuse and manipulation and could facilitate the rise of elected authoritarian regimes. The absence of constitutional safeguards and an independent judiciary could empty the democratic experiment of its essence, leaving behind an empty shell.

This article uses the electoral record of Tajikistan as its starting point. Bearing in mind that free and fair elections represent the tip of a vibrant democratic experiment, this article suggests that Tajikistan's democratic enterprise is exhibiting worrying signs. The fragile multiparty system appears to be weakening, in part due to external interests in what seems to be urgent security challenges that made Central Asia highly visible on the U.S. radar following the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Post-September 11 Context

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks and in the lead-up to U.S. military action in Afghanistan, Tajikistan appeared reluctant to be drawn into the fray. On September 16, the spokesperson for the Tajik Foreign Ministry denied any agreement between his government and the United States regarding the impending war in Afghanistan, although he did not rule out future cooperation. A few days later the influential *Asia-Plus* newspaper published an analytical assessment of the costs associated with Tajikistan's involvement in the war and identified the risk of retaliation by the Taliban.⁶ The paper studiously avoided discussing the implication of Tajikistan's involvement in the war for Russo-Tajik relations, or the risk of a domestic backlash. Said Abdullah Nuri, chairman of the NIT, however, had no such reservations and outlined his concerns with the latter when he warned that the indiscriminate killing of Afghans in the "war on terror" would not be acceptable.⁷

It was not until the United States began military operations against the Taliban that the Tajik leadership made a circumspect offer of assistance. On Monday, October 8, 2001, the Tajik government announced that Tajikistan would open its airspace to the U.S. air force for humanitarian operations.⁸ This announcement was warmly welcomed in Washington. Less than a week later, the United States promised to donate \$3 million to Tajikistan by way of assisting the drought-stricken agricultural sector, although U.S. authorities denied any connection between the committed funds and Tajikistan's decision to join the war on terror.⁹

In the same week, an extraordinary meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Security Council was held in Dushanbe to assess the situation. Vladimir Rushailo, the Russian chair of the Security Council, told reporters that CIS member states are committed to the reconstruction of Afghanistan and expect to play a "special role" in its future—a mildly disguised declaration of regional ambitions by Moscow. This meeting was followed by Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Dushanbe.

It took a visit by Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. defense secretary, to secure a serious commitment by the Tajik authorities to the war in Afghanistan. A month after the launch of operation Enduring Freedom, which resulted in heavy losses on the side of the Taliban, President Emomali Rakhmanov hosted Rumsfeld in Dushanbe and agreed to grant the antiterror coalition access to Tajikistan's airfields.¹⁰ By this stage, the authorities had reassessed the balance of power and had arrived at the conclusion that the United States was committed and capable of dealing with the ongoing Taliban problem. Within a few weeks Washington had achieved what had been the topic of deliberation for years by Russia and the CIS Security Treaty. Dushanbe's decision to align itself with the U.S.-led war on terror was based on practical considerations. This decision was conveyed to Rumsfeld when the Tajik foreign minister announced that "Tajikistan's security hinges upon the outcome of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan."¹¹

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The U.S.-Tajik agreement, ostensibly enjoying Moscow's approval, was a worrying sign about Russia's loosening grip on its "backyard." In response to the escalating U.S. presence and influence in Central Asia, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov demanded that the CIS play a leading role in global security.¹² The CIS summit in Moscow provided a highly visible occasion to promote that position. Russia took this meeting as an opportunity to remind CIS member states and the world that the challenge of terrorism was not a new phenomenon: "the CIS countries came to face the problem of terrorism much earlier than many other countries of the world."¹³ A similar chord was struck by Rakhmanov, who denied that Tajikistan's involvement in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan would weaken Russo-Tajik ties. Quite the contrary, Rakhmanov argued, Dushanbe's decision to participate in the antiterrorist coalition was made with Moscow's full consent. The Moscow summit, therefore, succeeded in projecting an image of unity and reinforcing Russia's key position in the future of the CIS. Yet, it was clear to all observers that the geostrategic landscape was going through significant changes, with potentially far-reaching implications for Russia's hegemonic aspirations in its "backyard," and the domestic politics of the states involved.

The United States in Tajikistan

The U.S. military presence in Tajikistan appeared to be scaled down following the toppling of the Taliban. At its height, the United States maintained a crew of around two hundred personnel with a fleet of helicopters operating out of the Kulob airfield, supported by French and Italian teams. They provided air support for the Northern Alliance's push against the Taliban at Mazar-e Sharif. But at the

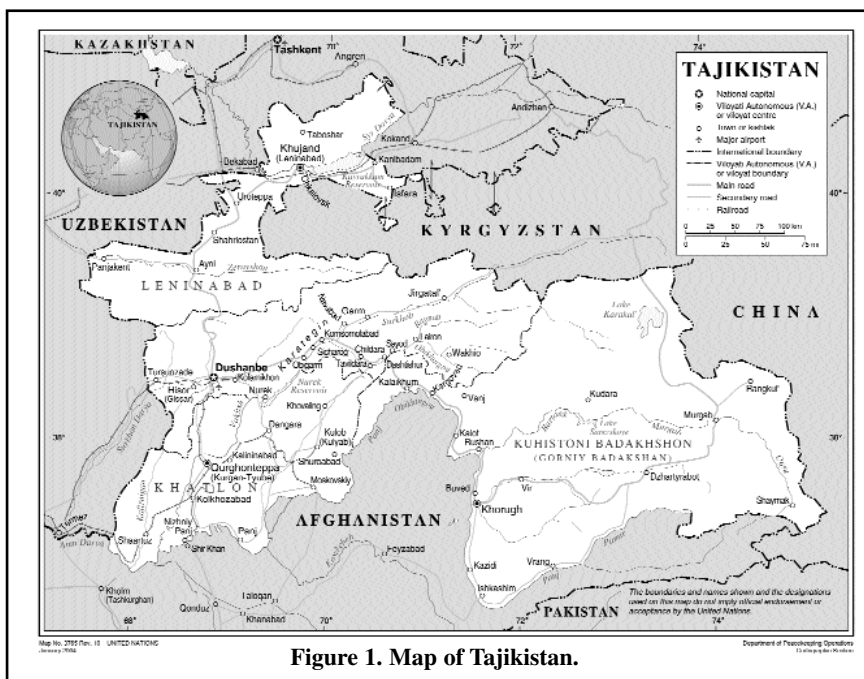


Figure 1. Map of Tajikistan.

end of 2002, the U.S. helicopters were no longer stationed there. The more substantial U.S. military presence in Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan) and Manas (Kyrgyzstan) at that time, and the completion of the operation in Afghanistan, made the Kulob airfield expendable. But this military disengagement did not reflect a diplomatic and strategic disengagement with Tajikistan. In Washington's revised geostrategic assessment, as indicated earlier, Central Asia was identified as a potential hotbed of Islamic radicalism.¹⁴ There was an acute sensitivity to the risks that weak states could pose to U.S. interests abroad, and Tajikistan was clearly a prime candidate in that category. Experiencing five years of civil war (1992–97), an uneasy coalition (1999–2000) riddled with corruption, and cutoff from the mountainous regions of the country during winter, the Tajik government's hold on power is tenuous. Drug trafficking is a major law-and-order issue and not even the Russian border guards, who were in charge of patrolling the 1,344 kilometer-long Tajik-Afghan border, could curtail this illicit trade. Tajikistan, therefore, is exhibiting all the signs of a weak state—a potential haven for Islamic militants.¹⁵ After September 11, the United States could not afford to leave Tajikistan and its Central Asian neighbors to their own devices.

U.S. policy toward Tajikistan encompasses two key components. First, in the hopes of reducing Tajikistan's reliance on Russia, Washington encourages the Tajik central government to upgrade and modernize its security forces to ensure law and order throughout the country. Although not articulated publicly, the level of attention devoted to the region by the United States and other international agencies where Washington has a key role, the notion of supplanting Russia would be

expected as a logical (and desirable) implication of this policy. The Istanbul NATO summit (June 2004) made it clear that Central Asia was now firmly on the United States' radar. The Summit Communiqué emphasized the organization's commitment to further strengthening of ties between NATO and the "strategically important regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia."¹⁶ Rumsfeld emphasized this point again in July 2006 when he told his Tajik hosts in Dushanbe that the United States considered the growing insurgency in Afghanistan and the drug trade a threat to regional and international security.

Second, democratic reforms and the consolidation of a representative government is seen in Washington as providing significant incentives for the political participation of a range of ethnic and political groups. A properly functioning democracy in Tajikistan is widely regarded as the best recipe against political alienation and radicalization of dissent. This is a critical link in the consolidation of the state and a pertinent safeguard against a repeated slide into anarchy and lawlessness. Given the history of the Tajik civil war and the international efforts to put in place an inclusive political system, the vested faith and expectation in the promise of democracy for Tajikistan is poignant.

Washington's track record in Tajikistan, however, has caused a degree of confusion and mistrust about the motives behind its behavior. In an interview with the Tajik daily, *Sadoi Mardum*, U.S. Ambassador Richard Hoagland praised preparations for the February 2005 parliamentary election and implicitly dismissed criticism by opposition parties that had rejected the new Law on Parliamentary Elections as favoring the ruling party.¹⁷ This public endorsement of the regime disappointed opposition groups and led them to question what the United States hoped to achieve. This endorsement contradicted earlier U.S. initiatives to strengthen civil society and enhance opposition parties' ability to challenge the government.

In 2003, for example, the U.S. Democratic Commission, operating under the chairmanship of the U.S. ambassador, earmarked more than \$100K to promote civic initiatives on human rights, media freedom, and market reform.¹⁸ Later in that year, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) organized an educational trip for a number of Tajik opposition leaders to Poland to familiarize them with the experience of electoral block-building in adverse political conditions.¹⁹ It was noteworthy that the ruling HDKT and the HKT were not invited to this exercise. This commitment to strengthening civil society has, at times, placed the United States center stage in the ongoing struggle between the opposition and the government. An example of the tenuous position of the United States was the fiasco surrounding the banning of *Ruz-e Nav*.

In August 2004, the government closed the only independent printing house in Tajikistan, which was used for the publication of a number of opposition papers. The move was widely criticized as censorship by stealth. *Ruz-e Nav*, an independent weekly, reacted to this blatant effort to shut the paper by contracting a U.S.-funded independent printing house in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and importing the published paper for distribution. On November 4, 2004, the Tajik authorities confiscated the *Ruz-e Nav* consignment at the border crossing for alleged tax violations and refused to allow further deliveries.²⁰ The Tajik prosecutor general,

Bobojon Bobokhonov, made a pointed rebuff against international agencies that he accused of funding “slanderous papers.” Bobokhonov warned that such publications threatened to reverse Tajikistan’s recovery from civil war.²¹

Tajik authorities were clearly displeased with U.S. support for the continued publication of independent and opposition papers. The authorities did not hide their dislike of the growing influence of the United States in Tajikistan’s civil society. In a blatant move to limit the scope of the U.S. activity, the Ministry of Justice refused to register NDI on the eve of the February 2005 parliamentary elections,²² prompting the U.S. diplomatic mission in Tajikistan to deny taking sides in the domestic affairs of Tajikistan. According to the deputy chief of mission of the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, Joseph Chamberlain, the U.S. supports the democratic process, not individual leaders or political parties.²³

Not taking sides in the domestic politics of Tajikistan, however, is an extremely complicated issue that reflects more than Washington’s desire to respect Tajik sovereignty. Against the backdrop of a revised geostrategic outlook in the United States and the commitment to remain involved in Central Asia, as well as the significant strengthening of ties between Washington and Dushanbe based on their common cause against the Taliban, Washington is mindful of the risks to its influence on the ruling political elite. A more aggressive policy in relation to democratic reforms, or open criticism of the regime for its administrative impediment to the full participation of opposition parties in the political life of Tajikistan would place ties between the U.S. administration and the Tajik government at risk. In a worst-case scenario for Washington, such an eventuality would push Tajikistan back into Russia’s sphere of influence. Geostrategic considerations in Washington appear to have tempered the push for democratization. Rustam Haydarov, a Tajik political analyst, appears to have grasped the essence of this uneasy compromise. Writing for *Biznes i Politika* in Dushanbe, Haydarov explored how U.S. commitment to the empowerment of Tajik civil society and the emergence of an independent mass media could not be allowed to jeopardize U.S.-Tajik relations because Russia is an ever-present factor in the region.²⁴

Russia in Tajikistan

Moscow has been a key player in Tajikistan’s post-Soviet experience. During the Tajik civil war, the Russian 201st motorized division was instrumental in paving the path to power for Rakhmanov in 1992 and protecting his government by taking charge of security for Tajikistan’s infrastructure and borders. Dushanbe’s entry into the CIS Security Treaty in May 1992 provided the legal framework for the stationing of a CIS peacekeeping force in Tajikistan between 1993 and 2000. In return for its support, Moscow was awarded a ten-year stationing right to base its 201st army division in Tajikistan in April 1999. This bilateral agreement was upgraded in October 2004 to offer Moscow permanent stationing rights in Tajikistan.

Commensurate with security guarantees that Moscow offered, it sponsored the peace deal that brought the five-year civil war to a close. The signing of the peace agreement in 1997 was the culmination of four years of diplomacy under the

patronage of Russia, Iran, and the United Nations. As might be expected, Russia was a key player. The first Inter-Tajik Peace Talks (April 1994) and the last meeting (June 1997), during which the final agreement was signed, were held in Moscow. The power-sharing peace deal brought the former protagonists together and laid the foundations of the post-civil war political structure in Tajikistan.²⁵

Beyond settling the civil war in Tajikistan, however, Russia has demonstrated little interest in the growth and consolidation of democracy. Prior to the civil war, Moscow maintained very close relations with the Leninabadi-dominated ruling regime in Dushanbe. But the shift in the political center of gravity with the ascendancy of the Kulobi leadership deprived Moscow of a regional ally. In subsequent years, Moscow managed to retain some leverage through its military presence and border protection, culminating in the 2004 base agreement. Moscow maintains a working relationship with the new leadership, and retains a tangible presence in Tajikistan. Anything beyond this, e.g., the return of the Leninabadi leadership to power, is seen in the Kremlin as clearly ambitious and risking instability in a fragile state. Moscow's preference for preserving the status quo discourages Russian leaders from promoting political openness. At face value, this preference for the status quo places Moscow at odds with Washington and its democratic vision for Tajikistan. Yet, the gap between Washington and Moscow on Tajikistan's democratic future may be more exaggerated than real.

Democracy on the Move

The key question is to what extent the convergence of international interests on Tajikistan contributes to the democratic process. Tajikistan's past experience may provide cause for optimism. The interim power-sharing arrangement that succeeded the civil war and legislative amendments that facilitated the legalization of the NIT, the HDT, and other parties were the explicit fruits of international patronage and commitment to Tajikistan's peace process.

Although an important component of the peace deal that provided a 40 percent quota for the opposition at all government levels was never fully implemented, it did allow Tajikistan to move away from open, internal hostility. This has been an imperfect solution, but it put Tajikistan on a unique and very promising course. For the first time, an avowedly Islamic party was being incorporated into the political framework and given political legitimacy. This was a significant departure from conventional practice in Central Asia. The intelligentsia's hopes for democratic prospects in Tajikistan were raised even further after the United States reevaluated its interests in Central Asia. That the United States, with its ideological commitment to social, economic, and political liberalization, was now upgrading its ties with Tajikistan could be seen as a welcome sign for democracy in Tajikistan.

The path to a democratic Tajikistan, however, has proven to be arduous and fraught with obstacles. The first presidential election following the formal conclusion of the civil war was designed to end the transition government and set Tajikistan on a course to democracy. But from the start, the electoral registration process was marred with scandals and charges of misconduct, putting serious doubt on the legitimacy of the final results. Four candidates were nominated for

the November 1999 presidential elections, but only one was allowed to collect signatures to formalize his candidacy. That was the incumbent, President Rakhmanov.²⁶ The three unregistered nominees protested to no avail to the Electoral Commission regarding administrative red tape in local governments that hampered the collection of signatures necessary for their formal registration.²⁷ On October 8, 1999, a meeting between the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), the UN special envoy, and the OSCE won the unregistered nominees two more days to collect the necessary signatures, but that concession had no bearing on the impediments to signature collection at the local level.²⁸ On the same day the International Contact Group (ICG) expressed concern about limitations on signature collection by presidential nominees and equal access to mass media.²⁹

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On October 12, 1999, the CEC formally refused to register the candidacies of Sulton Quvvatov (HDT), Davlat Usmon (NIT), and Sayefiddin Turayev (Party of Justice [HA]), for their failure to submit the required number of signatures. This prompted the

three to call for a general boycott of the poll. A week later, following an order by the Supreme Court, Davlat Usmon was registered as a presidential candidate.³⁰ The decision to register the NIT nominee only two weeks before the presidential poll was dismissed by Usmon as a political ploy to cover-up the systemic prejudice that characterized the signature collection process, and the ultimate illegitimacy of the election results. Usmon protested his “illegal” registration.³¹ Abdullah Nuri, chairman of the NIT, endorsed this view. According to Nuri, the Supreme Court order was clearly a political move to deflect international criticism and placate U.S. and European observers.³² In other words, the regime was keen to avoid a one-horse race for the presidency because it portrayed a negative image.

The election did not deliver a surprise. Rakhmanov received 96.9 percent of the votes, while Davlat Usmon received a mere 2.1 percent.

Less than a year later, Tajikistan went through another poll. The NIT and other opposition parties embraced the February 2000 parliamentary elections as an opportunity to become a real force in Tajik politics. Six parties vied for popular votes. The HA nominated fifteen candidates, the Democratic Party (HDT) nineteen, the NIT fifteen, the Socialist Party eighteen, the HKT twenty, and the ruling HDKT twenty-one. The results were very disappointing for the opposition, especially for the two parties that were involved in the civil war and had subsequently received amnesty in the peace process. The HDT received just over 3 percent of the vote and failed to gain any seats in the parliament, while the NIT received only 7.3 percent, which gave it two seats in the new *majlis*.³³

The parliamentary electoral campaign was not without controversy. Reports by the international observers, documented in the OSCE's final report, suggest that despite equal free time to competing parties, the media coverage of the campaign was biased. There were also complaints regarding the partiality of the electoral procedure. Nuri, for example, wrote to Rakhmanov regarding the exclusion of NIT representatives from local electoral commissions in twenty-five constituencies. The issue was also raised with the UN and OSCE representatives.³⁴ The HKT had similar complaints when its party chief told RIA Novosti that accredited HKT electoral observers were barred from a number of polling stations.³⁵ It is worth noting that the HKT won thirteen seats in the *majlis*, making it the second largest parliamentary block after the HDKT. The question of transparency and electoral observation was raised again at the national referendum in June 2003, which extended the presidential term to seven years and set Rakhmanov up for reelection in 2006. This referendum was conducted without the presence of international observers and Rakhmanov justified their absence by insisting that the referendum was an "internal matter" and hinted that international observation of the referendum could be equal to interfering in the internal affairs of Tajikistan. In an apparent snub to the international community, Rakhmanov stated: "Tajikistan is an independent country with its own constitution . . . it is the people who vote for the constitution not international observers."³⁶

In February 2005, Tajiks went to the polls again to vote for the sixty-three seat lower house. The opposition parties were optimistic about the prospects of gaining more seats in the Parliament and reducing the HDKT's near-monopoly. The NIT, the HKT, and the HDT hoped that five years of preparation (since the previous parliamentary election) would pay off. According to Muhiddin Kabiri, first deputy chairman of the NIT, his party expected to attract around 20 percent of the votes.³⁷ The results, however, were again very disappointing to opposition parties. Instead of making inroads, the opposition lost ground to the ruling party, with the HDKT increasing its seats from thirty-six to forty-nine (see table 1).

The 2005 election outcome was greeted with shock and indignation by opposition parties. They accused the government of interfering with the electoral process and a deep-seated aversion to a genuine multiparty system. At a press conference following the election, Rahmatullo Zoirov, head of the Social Democratic Party, which failed to gain representation in the Parliament, accused Rakhmanov of being power hungry and moving toward authoritarianism.³⁸ Other opposition leaders, who shared this stark assessment, announced their plans to file a joint lawsuit against the election results. The opposition, however, refrained from calling for public protest on the Ukrainian or Georgian model for fear of bloodshed. This was also in stark contrast to protest rallies in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where opposition parties contested the February 2005 parliamentary election results. The reluctance of the Tajik opposition to call for public protests was explained by Kabiri to be based on prudence and civic responsibility. According to him, those involved in the civil war are now firmly in power and would not hesitate to defend their position by force.

TABLE 1. Results of the Tajik Parliamentary Elections in 2000 and 2005

Party name	2000		2005	
	% of the vote	Seats won	% of the vote	Seats won
Communist Party	20.39	13	13.64	4
Islamic Rebirth Party	7.31	2	8.94	2
People's Democratic Party	64.91	36	74.9	49
Adolatkoh (PoJ)	1.32	0	—	—
Democratic Party	3.54	0	1.17	0
Socialist Party	1.22	0	0.3	0
Social Democratic Party	—	—	0.5	0
Independent		10		8

Sources. For 2000, see OSCE Election Observation, *Republic of Tajikistan, Elections to Parliament Final Report*, May 17, 2000, 23. For 2005, see Tajik Television first channel, Dushanbe, in Tajik, March 1, 2005; and Tajik Television first channel, Dushanbe, in Russian, March 1, 2005.

Note. Tajikistan's Assembly of Representatives (*Majlisi Namoyaandagon*) is composed of sixty-three directly represented representatives. Deputies are elected in a mixed electoral system: forty-one members from single mandate constituencies, and twenty-one on the basis of nationwide party lists. Political parties are also allowed to nominate candidates at single constituencies. The percentages shown here relate to the total number of votes the political parties received.

Instead the opposition pinned its hopes on the legal safeguards and chose to submit a formal complaint to the CEC with an eighty-five-page report on election violations. The four opposition parties involved in the complaint (the NIT, the HDT, and the HKT) called for the annulment of election results in Dushanbe and threatened to take the matter to Tajikistan's Supreme Court.³⁹

As far as the NIT and the HDT are concerned, Tajikistan's expected transition to democracy and a multiparty system remains a distant dream. The Inter-Tajik peace agreement, which ended the civil war and facilitated the legalization of opposition parties, anticipated the popular support base for the United Tajik Opposition to be around one-third of the total population. Yet the opposition has consistently underperformed in local and national elections, even after concrete commitment and support by various international actors, most significantly by the United States.

Administrative fiat by the ruling party and what appears to be a lack of judicial independence are often cited as crucial factors in the opposition's disappointing electoral performance. These are entrenched problems that preserve the ruling regime's authoritarian tendencies and remain unaddressed. According to a 2006 Freedom House report, "major shortcomings in the judicial system owing to lack of fairness or trials, disproportionate power of the prosecution, and the continuing ill treatment of the detained," still plague Tajikistan.⁴⁰ The opposition leadership fears that without a serious interjection of international interest in Tajikistan's faltering democracy, the November 2006 presidential poll would simply reaffirm Rakhmanov's hold on power and further marginalize the opposition.

International Assessment of Polls

The response of the international community to electoral bias and mismanagement did not come as a surprise to observers of Tajikistan. The blatant abuse of power by local officials during the 1999 presidential campaign, which hampered the signature collection of the three challengers to the incumbent president, was widely condemned in Europe and the United States. The issue was deemed serious enough for the U.S. ambassador to Tajikistan to publicly urge the authorities to ensure fair elections.⁴¹ The position of the German embassy was more circumspect, but unambiguous nonetheless. In a written statement on the eve of the presidential poll, the German embassy noted that the presidential elections “were a test of Tajikistan’s willingness to implement the peace agreement and move towards a pluralistic democracy.”⁴²

The fiasco of the signature collection led the OSCE to decide against sending election observers to Tajikistan. The official statement noted that restrictions on contending presidential candidates and political parties disqualified the campaign as free and fair, and that the election process did not meet OSCE standards.⁴³ By contrast, electoral monitors from the CIS sanctioned the poll as free of misconduct and endorsed its results. The Russian ambassador was adamant that the poll was carried out in strict observation of the law.⁴⁴

The same divergence of opinion marked the 2000 parliamentary elections. On the same day as the poll, the CIS election monitoring team was quick to endorse the election as free and fair, consistent with international standards.⁴⁵ Other observers were less categorical in their assessment. International observers verified restricted access to polling stations by local election monitors, frequent interference by local governments in the preparation and running of the election, and instances of proxy voting in more than half of the precincts. These issues were raised in a formal, joint statement by the UN and OSCE election observers. The Joint UN/OSCE Mission especially criticized the absence of unbiased media coverage as well as the lack of transparency. The independence of the Electoral Commission was another important question, according to the UN/OSCE mission. The overall assessment, therefore, was a qualified endorsement of Tajikistan’s hesitant steps toward democracy. According to the report, while political plurality was being ensured through the participation of six parties in the parliamentary election, significant procedural issues undermined the “minimum democratic standards for equal, free, fair, secret, transparent and accountable elections.”⁴⁶

This pattern of CIS endorsement/OSCE criticism was evident in the February 2005 parliamentary elections. The Russian embassy in Tajikistan hailed the elections as a “considerable step forward towards the further democratization of society.”⁴⁷ This ringing endorsement incensed the Tajik opposition, leading Rahmatullo Valiyev from the HDT to dismiss the CIS observers as a stumbling block to fair and open elections. In an interview with the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Valiyev claimed that CIS observers were drawn from various electoral commissions in the CIS and had an interest in endorsing the electoral process in Tajikistan because they will, in turn, receive election observers from the Tajik Electoral Commission.⁴⁸ This may be an exaggerated assessment with a tinge of

conspiracy theory, but the continual pattern of CIS support for highly questionable procedures in Tajikistan's presidential and parliamentary elections makes it difficult to describe the CIS's election monitoring role as positive.

In contrast, the head of the OSCE monitoring mission described the election procedure as dishonest and riddled with undemocratic practices and government interference. This bleak assessment led the OSCE mission to conclude at a post-election press conference that Tajikistan had made no "substantial progress" toward democracy since its 2000 parliamentary election.⁴⁹ The U.S. position was less dismissive, but critical nonetheless. U.S. diplomat Paul Jones stated: "despite some improvement over past elections, Sunday's poll ultimately failed to meet key OSCE and international standards for democratic elections, and were marred by large-scale irregularities."⁵⁰ This open criticism of the election, however, did not translate into support for opposition leaders' call for the annulment of election results. International observers appear to fear the disruptive repercussions that such a move might have and the risk it would pose to political stability.

Democratic Prospects?

Tajikistan's recovery from the bloody civil war of 1992–97 has been slow and painful. Memories of the fratricide still haunt Tajik politics while both ends of the political spectrum accuse the other of pushing the country down the dangerous track of chaos and conflict. Tajikistan was the only Central Asian state to legalize its Islamic party and allow it to participate in politics. That unique opportunity, however, did not necessarily translate into a concerted effort to create and foster a political environment that would sustain a multiparty system. State leverage over the media through its control of printing shops is an important issue in this regard. This has allowed the HDKT to effectively influence the terms of public debate and restrict criticism of his authoritarian tendencies. The extension of the presidential term in 1999 from five to seven years was an early sign of Rakhmanov's desire to consolidate his hold on power with the unavoidable negative repercussions for a budding civil society.

U.S. influence in Tajikistan appears to have made a difference on the political landscape and inspired hopes for a breakthrough. Washington's commitment to political and economic liberalization has manifested itself in a number of programs that assist and encourage civil society and the entrenchment of the fragile multiparty system. The U.S. State Department has repeatedly emphasized the direct relationship between democratic state building and long-term stability. This commitment to the democratic experiment in Tajikistan, however, is balanced by Washington's determination to deal with a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and other Islamic militants in the region. An important component of the war on terror is Washington's heightened sensitivity to the risks posed by failed states.

Afghanistan is the prime example of how a failed state can facilitate the planning, training, and perpetration of a catastrophic terrorist attack. Washington and its European allies are determined to avoid a repeat of that scenario and consider Central Asia to be at risk if unattended. Washington's push for political and economic liberalization in Tajikistan, therefore, is constantly tempered

by security calculations and the risks entailed in a speedy transition to democracy. This calculation places tangible restraints on Washington's approach to the ruling regime in Tajikistan. Even though the United States is unhappy with entrenched undemocratic practices and the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime, it has refrained from scaling down its ties with Dushanbe or placing any sanctions on Tajikistan. Pushing too hard and fast for reforms is seen in Washington as a dangerous policy that could destabilize Tajikistan's democratic experiment and risk eroding Washington's foothold there. This concern with preserving stability seriously undermines Washington's democratic vision for Tajikistan and has effectively narrowed the gap between the U.S. stance and Russia's preference for the status quo. As a result, despite early hopes for an external boost for democratization, geostrategic considerations appear to have tempered the democratic experiment.

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