

Report

Does Tajikistan matter? Political trends in modern Tajikistan





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Tajikistan is a small, poor, and badly-managed state, which has been under the rule of Emomali Rahmonov since 1992. The country is characterised by weak rule of law, the absence of civil society activism, high levels of corruption, and dependency on foreign aid. Nevertheless, a number of geopolitical and geostrategic factors make the Central Asian region particularly topical and timely situated, as it is, in the middle of Eurasia, and at the crossroads between China, the Middle East, Europe and Russia. Despite its distance from the region, the USA is interested in creating favourable conditions for cooperation with the region, owing to its proximity to Afghanistan and the Middle East. Taking current processes of globalisation into account, Central Asia will increasingly be attracting the attention of analysts and strategists. The primary issues in Central Asia that are of global concern include water and energy security, military security, and the protection of routes and transportation passages, among others. Central Asia's successful management of political processes might, therefore, grant it control over the wider Eurasian region.

The processes articulated above are relevant to each of the Central Asian states, and matters relating to bilateral relations between them are as important. This includes local military alliances, and the integration of states into regional economic organisations. These states have diverse perspectives on the regional issues. This article suggests a twofold analysis of current Tajikistan political processes. Firstly, it examines domestic

political processes in the republic. Thereafter, it examines the role of Tajikistan within the region and considers the most important implications for world politics.

Twenty years of disorder

Tajikistan is a small presidential republic suffering from harsh authoritarianism. It is the poorest member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and has a population of eight million, with the average age of twenty-three years. The country's GDP (PPP) in 2012 was \$17.72 billion, and it had a per capita income of \$2,200, placing it at 190 on when compared to the rest of the world. The level of urbanisation and industrialisation is extremely low. Two million citizens are migrant workers in Russia and Kazakhstan, and their remittances constitute approximately half of the GDP. Half of the population lives below the poverty line. Only 700,000 people have access to the Internet, placing Tajikistan at 110 in the world in terms of internet access(1).

The protracted and senseless civil war from 1992 to 1997, sparked when Tajikistan gained independence, the increasing social and economic challenges, and regional tribalism have driven the economy into the ground. The conflict that began as a political confrontation between the emergent nationalists supported by Islamists, and the old communist establishment, developed into an ethnic war between representatives of various clans. Fighters included mercenaries from Russia, Uzbekistan, Caucasus, and Afghanistan, and military instructors came from foreign countries as well as individuals released from prison. As a result of this fratricidal war, between 40,000 and 100,000 people were killed, and about a million became refugees(2). The war, with the intervention of neighbouring states and non-state actors, was accompanied by indiscriminate massacres of ethnic and religious rivals.

Rahmonov has been at the helm of Tajikistan since 1992. After the civil war he strengthened his position by eliminating political rivals, and he survived several assassination attempts. The Tajikistan constitution was amended in 2003, allowing two presidential terms of seven years each, beginning from 2006. In the 2006 election, Rahmonov won 79.3 per cent of the vote and began his first of two terms in terms of the new constitution.(3) Tajikistan currently stands at 151st place in The Economist's Democracy Index.(4)

Tajikistan will hold presidential elections in November 2013. The nature of the opposition and the rigidity of governing bodies provide no reason to believe that the elections will reconfigure the balance of forces power in the country, despite behind-the-scenes negotiations between the elites. Further, as is typical under authoritarian rule, action taken against opposition forces and the media continues.

It is predicted that the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan will nominate Rahmonov, who has already initiated his 'election campaign'. Zayd Saidov, a businessman and former minister of industry, was detained at Dushanbe airport on 19 May, and arrested over allegations of corruption. Earlier this year he had announced the establishment of the New Tajikistan party, which promised to address the social and economic problems of the country, and announced its participation in the 2015 parliamentary elections.(5)

An interesting twist in the forthcoming presidential election will be the case of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). One of its leaders, Sherik Karamkhudoev, was thrust into the spotlight after being arrested during civil unrest in the town of Khorog in 2012. In May 2013, he was sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment. Charges against him included incitement to violence, illegal possession of weapons, organising of a criminal community, and rioting(6). However, the popularity of another IRPT leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, is very high. This is probably because the country is exhausted from endless political and economic turmoil, and is desperately yearning for change.

According to analysts' predictions, the presidential elections promise little shift in the structure of power. Faced with Islamic opposition, the country requested foreign aid. Nevertheless, the current regional balance is fragile considering the shift of power in the Middle East, and the forthcoming withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. The unpredictability of regional processes is amplified by the local disillusionment with government. Hence, apathy due to decades of instability and the incompetence of political elites might spill over, and instigate an interesting shift in power.

Tajikistan: object or subject in regional power creation?

Despite its economic impotence, Tajikistan's role is more significant than it seems. Its location makes Tajikistan one of the key actors in the regional political architecture, particularly with regards to the fierce Central Asian water feud. Water shortage is a decisive factor in regional politics. Almost all the regional water supply – about eighty per cent – is to be found in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but is also consumed by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Tajikistan, controlling the Amu Darya River Basin, possesses vast water resources, and, with four per cent of the world's fresh water supply, is the country with eighth highest water supply in the world(7).

The states of the region are unable to reach a consensus on the adoption of a common mechanism for water resource management that will provide adequate political, economic, and ecological benefits for all. Each country attempts to resolve the problem

unilaterally, to the detriment of the others. The core problem is that each state has distinct objectives for water use, and the various objectives do not necessarily coincide. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are located downstream and utilise water for agricultural, while the highland countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which suffer from a shortage of gas and oil resources, are eager to use the region's rivers for hydropower(8). Neighbouring Russia adds fuel to the fire by supporting some or other economic project in order to get benefits for its regional security. The policies of these states resemble the 'prisoner's dilemma', where two prisoners refuse to cooperate – even in their own interests – assuming betrayal to be more useful than cooperation. With these states, however, more than two 'prisoners' are involved, and all of them seem to lose if they do not collaborate.

Under these circumstances, it is infeasible for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to sit together at the negotiating table. Apart from their bilateral contradictions, they remain the persistent topic of discussion among world's great political powers – the USA and Russia – each seeking to win over Rahmonov and Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov.

Traditionally, Russia viewed Tajikistan as a territory of strategic importance. In the late nineteenth century, Russian expansion to Central Asia delineated the zones of responsibility between the Russian British empires. Central Asia remained a buffer zone and within Russia's sphere of interest. Tajikistan is a member of numerous military and economic alliances dominated by Russia. These include the Eurasian Economic Community, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and, most importantly, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Russia recently signed a contract with Tajikistan allowing the 201 Russian military base to remain in Tajikistan until at least 2042. The agreement includes the provision of military and technical equipment to Tajikistan.(9) To secure its position in the region, Russia will also provide Tajikistan with \$220 million in material aid. By rendering this support, Russia is supporting the political establishment in Tajikistan, and legitimising the actions of the regime.

Russia is not the only country that fuels Rahmonov's government, however. Tajikistan was the first country in Central Asia to sign a transit agreement in support of NATO-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan.(10) Earlier this year, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Robert Blake, visited Dushanbe to discuss regional security. The USA is interested in the deployment of NATO and US military facilities in Tajikistan after 2014. More recently, Rahmonov visited NATO's Brussels headquarters, where he met NATO head, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. As regional security is a national priority for the USA, it allocated \$2 million of technical assistance to Tajikistan from the beginning of 2013.

From January to May 2013, international aid allocated to Tajikistan from thirty-nine states reached \$32 million. The USA provided the largest share (69.7 per cent), followed by Russia (7.8 per cent) and China (3.6 per cent). In 2011, the total aid from states reached \$222 million,⁽¹¹⁾ excluding preferential credits allocated by international banks and agencies. Currently, more than eighty states, NGOs and international organisations assist Tajikistan, and the country's institutions are highly dependent on this aid.⁽¹²⁾

The USA and Russia are not the only countries that seek to win over the Tajikistan government. India has been modernising the Ayni airbase since 2002; its status remains uncertain. India's interest in Tajikistan is based on issues of regional security; the problem of Afghanistan; narcotics trafficking; counteracting 'radical Islam'; and resistance to Pakistani reinforcement. Iran traditionally has had close ties with Tajikistan due to cultural similarity. Iran recently pledged economic and energy support to Tajikistan in exchange for preferential water supply. Apart from that, Iran is involved in a number of infrastructural construction projects, including railways and highways aimed at connecting Tajikistan and Iran through Afghanistan. Military cooperation between the two states is developing within the framework of a local military alliance and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which the Islamic Republic of Iran participates as an observer state.⁽¹³⁾

China too uses economic leverage and influence in Central Asia. In 2012, China and Tajikistan finally settled a territorial dispute, and, according to a border demarcation protocol, Tajikistan handed over approximately 1000 square kilometres of land to China in exchange for certain economic benefits. For example, China will extend a credit of \$140 million to increase industrial capacity of the Zarafshon gold mining company on the border with China. In addition, the states agreed that Chinese Dong Ying Heli would build an oil refinery in the south of Tajikistan.⁽¹⁴⁾

Despite the persistent but futile attempts of regional players to bend Tajikistan to their interests, Rahmonov has successfully played on the contradictions among the powerful. Tajikistan is the main transit point for Afghan drug trafficking, in which, it is claimed, senior Tajik officials are involved. Eighty to ninety tonnes of the Afghan drug flow to Central Asia – for distribution to Russia and Europe – pass through Tajikistan annually.⁽¹⁵⁾ Only three per cent of the Tajik population inhabits the Gorno-Badakhshan Province, but they maintain close cultural, religious and ethnic ties with Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province. The long frontier with Afghanistan is weakly protected, and the mountain area frequently serves as asylum for Afghan fighters.

The geopolitical situation is such that Tajikistan is the key player that could threaten the existing status quo in the region. Its domestic stability and solid footing in regional affairs is a general outcome of the Eurasian security architecture. Despite its utter economic failings, surrounding states aim to enlist Tajikistan's favour in order to protect their regional security. Along with geostrategic importance, its great hydropower potential makes it a significant participant in regional politics. These factors enable Rahmonov's regime to resort to various measures against domestic and regional political opponents; the regime is assured that international donors and allies will overlook its misconduct. The government has been extremely successful in reaping dividends from the region's political contradictions. In addition, donors and international actors demonstrate complete indifference to the character of the regime, prioritising, instead, their strategic interests. This rentier style of political bargaining by Tajikistan demonstrates an essential inability to deal with neighbours on the local level – the entire Central Asian region – and globally. The forthcoming presidential election is fascinating as it does not guarantee immunity for the Tajik establishment. This is especially intriguing in light of events in the countries surrounding Tajikistan, including in Afghanistan and the rest of the Middle East.

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- (10) See 'NATO's relations with Tajikistan', http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50312.htm.
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