

**Statement of Senator Sam Brownback, Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Briefing on
Democracy in Tajikistan: Preview of the Presidential Election
October 26, 2006**

Located between China, Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia, Tajikistan is on the southern edge of the OSCE, an organization comprised of 56 nations stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok bound together by mutually shared commitments on political freedoms, respect for human rights, security and economic development. Since achieving independence, Tajikistan has been on a difficult journey into this community of values, and its progress towards democratization is important to the United States.

Soon after the collapse of USSR, Tajikistan was rocked by a civil war. Fighting raged from 1992-1997 and resulted in the deaths of between 50,000 to 100,000 people, not to mention over one million refugees. In addition, Tajikistan's fragile infrastructure was seriously damaged, wreaking havoc on an economy struggling to find its feet. The war ended in 1997 under a UN armistice that created a power-sharing agreement among the warring parties, including the only legal Islamic party in Central Asia.

Despite the gains achieved since the peace agreement signed almost 10 years ago, as Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I am concerned about Tajikistan's commitment to democratic reforms and human rights. Imomali Rakhmonov has served as president since 1994 and has solidified his power, effectively pushing any effective political opposition out of Tajikistan's political space. The last presidential election fell short of OSCE commitments, as did the parliamentary elections last year. Should President Rakhmonov win again on November 6, constitutional amendments passed last year allow him to potentially remain in office until 2020. While there are multiple candidates, the major opposition leaders have experienced significant harassment from authorities and most have decided not to run.

Problematic actions against opposition leaders include:

- the sentencing of Muhammadruzi Iskandarov, the former head of the Democratic Party, to 23 years in prison and allegations of prison mistreatment
- slander charges brought before his death against the late Said Abdullo Nuri, Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party
- the repeated threatening of criminal penalties against the Chairman of the Socialist Democratic Party, Rahmatullo Zoyirov

Recent decrees by the Tajik Central Commission on Elections and Referenda addressed some election system deficiencies, but questions remain about the follow through necessary to ensure a free and fair election. Full implementation of CCER decrees is critical, as ensuring a free and fair election involves not only a sound election law, but vigilant enforcement of its regulations. It would also be positive if non-partisan election monitors could observe Precinct Election Commissions, and if all political parties could participate on Precinct Election Commissions, regardless of whether they have candidates running.

It is true the government provided opposition parties free time on state television, but it has also limited the ability of independent media outlets to operate freely. Several newspapers have been closed, and the Ministry of Culture reportedly wants all media organizations to re-register by the end of December. The Helsinki Commission will be monitoring whether this re-registration effort is used to punish outlets that are critical of the president on the conduct of the election.

To be sure, Tajikistan has made progress. However, only through free and fair elections that allow Tajik citizens to freely express their political views can the country truly consolidate these gains.

Other issues are also of concern. There was talk earlier this year of a new law on NGOs that would limit their ability to operate freely. We are troubled by the problems the National Democratic Institute has experienced with registration and hope that when it does reapply to register, it will not encounter any difficulties. Also, if the draft NGO law is resurrected, the government should work closely with the OSCE Mission and U.S. Embassy to ensure it meets international standards.

Maintaining respect for religious freedoms in Tajikistan is likewise very important. Many were therefore troubled by the first draft of a new religion law released earlier this year, which fell well short of OSCE commitments. Particularly troublesome were the excessive powers given to government agencies allowing them to interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations, such as limits on mosque construction and bans on proselytism. If a draft is considered again, I urge Tajik authorities to continue working with the OSCE Mission and OSCE Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion to ensure that any draft is fully inline with OSCE commitments. Another area of concern is the increase in arrests of members of independent Muslim groups and the banning of the hijab in some schools.

There are conflicting reports on whether Dushanbe's synagogue will be spared demolition. Considering Tajikistan's unique relationship with its Jewish community, I hope Tajik authorities will work with the small community to find a just solution to this situation.

In closing, Tajikistan has accomplished much in this decade of peace. However, only through political openness, religious freedoms and respect for human rights can Tajikistan's future success be assured.