

**STATEMENT BY ANTHONY BOWYER TO THE HELSINKI COMMISSION
ON THE UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TAJIKISTAN**

October 26, 2006

Members of the Committee, guests and fellow colleagues, I am honored to appear before you today to discuss the current state of electoral democracy in Tajikistan and the assistance efforts supported by the United States to help Tajikistan meet its international obligations as it prepares to hold national elections to the office of President on November 6. The upcoming poll represents the third presidential election in Tajikistan's post-Soviet history, and the second since the official conclusion of the Civil War in 1997. Since that time the country has also held two national and local legislative elections, the most recent coming in February of last year, and a national referendum held in 2003.

In assessing the current state of affairs in the country leading up to this election, I believe it is important to put our hands around some basic demographic information. Of Tajikistan's population of 7.3 million, less than half (3.2 million) are eligible to vote. But more important, nearly 50% of all citizens are 15 years of age or younger, a stark demographic reality that requires nurturing to create a functioning, sustainable *participatory democracy* through engagement of citizens in the election process and all facets of decision-making, in order to realize its national potential. This generation has little direct recollection of the Civil War and virtually no recollection whatsoever of the Soviet period. The need to give them an opportunity to make their voices heard through democratic means is obvious; the alternatives to this are equally as obvious, though potentially ominous.

Interest in these elections among young persons, which have traditionally been the least active group of voters, is growing. I have been told that our colleagues here at the Embassy have received numerous requests from Tajiks studying in the U.S. to be able to cast ballots by mail, as they are unable to travel to the official out-of-country voting centers being set up in New York and Washington. While voting-by-mail is not an option, the point is that young people both here and in Tajikistan are taking more notice of the elections and are asking questions and demanding information. This should be seen as a positive for Tajikistan and for democracy, as rising expectations among a well-informed, media-savvy electorate with unprecedented contact with the outside and who are more critical of the information they receive, can only help advance the cause of democracy in their country. I say this with a caveat, for it is imperative that the Government of Tajikistan continue to invest in the education of its citizens, young and old alike, so that people not only participate in the elections but that they participate in an informed manner, knowing not only who the candidates or parties are and what they represent, but also understanding the system of government and appreciating what they are voting for and why. In this I greatly encourage the U.S. and international donor community to continue, and in fact increase, its support of mandatory, school-based civic education as part of the national curriculum for the growing youth population and voter education at all levels both in times of elections and in-between election cycles.

A nationally-representative public opinion survey conducted last year by IFES, part of a long-term study, showed that while just over one-third of respondents indicated they held

at least a moderate interest in politics, nearly two-thirds felt uninformed about the political and economic situation in the country. The survey showed an interesting relationship between information and engagement; those who are the most engaged in civic participation are those who also report they have the most information. But a lack of information does not necessarily mean a lack of interest in politics, as three in four persons reported having discussed politics with friends and neighbors, and three in five with members of their families. A majority (58%) firmly believed in the power of voting and that voting gives them influence on how decisions in the country are made. Yet a lack of information about the process itself, while not necessarily affecting whether or not people will come to the polls, has the effect of discouraging their maximal participation in the process of democratic governance once the election is over.

Confidence in the system of elections has been an issue among opposition parties during previous votes, and remains an issue in the upcoming poll. In addition, international observer contingents, most notably from the OSCE, have outlined shortcomings in the process which are well-known. As a representative of a non-partisan international assistance organization which has been working in Tajikistan with the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda since 1994, allow me to provide some perspective on the preparations presently underway. It is my impression that international perception of how these elections are run is exceptionally important to the Government of Tajikistan.

We know about the continued shortcomings in the process, ranging from the continued practice from Soviet times of “negative voting” (marking of ballots), stringent signature requirements for presidential candidates, the overall media environment, an insufficient appeals process and some holes in the electoral legislation. We have discussed the situation regarding the lack of independent domestic monitors and a tight timeline for the registration of international observers. We are aware of the statements made by some opposition who are boycotting the elections and the splintering taking place within opposition parties.

I do, however, believe the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda is working to improve administrative procedures in accordance with recommendations made by the domestic and international community, which may seem small on one hand but represent significant steps forward on the other: providing opposition candidates with free time on state television, mandating that protocols of final results be posted immediately at the polling stations after they are compiled, greater adherence to ballot issuance procedures, publicly documenting voters who are out of the country for work-related reasons, the right for political parties and NGOs to nominate members to District and Precinct Election Commissions, a new and energetic voter outreach and information campaign, and consideration of enhanced security measures such as voter inking – which could be implemented for future elections. At present the Elections Commission is conducting a nationwide training for members of District and Precinct Election Commissions, a project IFES has been involved with through a grant by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, as well as publishing informational bulletins such as 100 Questions and Answers about the Presidential Elections.

As with any such improvement in procedures, of course, will be how they are ultimately implemented, and whether there exists sufficient political will to do so. Focusing attention on the technical aspects of the present process, I can say that during the 2005 elections and certainly this year as well, the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda has been exceptionally open to cooperation, to discussion, to accepting recommendations that will increase transparency in the elections and build public confidence in the results. The reality is that the CCER, as a state body, is a relatively small unit presiding over a vast constituency of District and Precinct Election Commissions. Its resources are limited. It is still striving for recognition as a distinct and independent entity. It has presided over elections in an environment of peace and stability for less than ten years, and continues to face challenges in transition, as does the country itself. I believe we in the international community need to recognize from whence Tajikistan has emerged, and what they have transcended, to reach the point they are at today. Though we must indeed continue to hold them to the highest international standards of open and fair elections; we as well must consider the context of Tajikistan's development and brief history of independence when rendering judgment. We must also continue to recognize the strategic importance of Tajikistan as a partner of the United States in so many areas. Tajikistan needs our support to help it continue developing democratic institutions that will rise to the challenge of a growing population. We must recognize the opportunity cost of failing to do so. Other, regional hegemony with direct influence over the country, not to mention non-state actors operating in the region, do not necessarily share Tajikistan's stated commitment to democracy. As soon as these elections come to pass we should be working long-term to help Tajikistan prepare for the next parliamentary elections in five years with legal reform initiatives, capacity- and institution-building, regional networking, civic education, support for political pluralism, and technical upgrades. There is an opportunity to make a lasting contribution to the process that will continue encouraging democratic reform, working at both the highest levels of decision-making and at the grassroots level with the decision-makers of tomorrow.

I emphasize in particular the latter of these two, the young persons of Tajikistan. The future of democracy is in their hands, and we have the great possibility, if not responsibility, with our colleagues at all levels in the country, to help young persons develop the skills they will need to build democratic traditions.

I encourage everyone to support continued constructive engagement with Tajikistan for the long-term; to show tough love when it is required, but to equally show praise. We must embrace Tajikistan as a strategic partner, one, symbolized by its great poet Rudaki, holding in high regard its truest friends and as its most cherished idols knowledge and experience.