

**Helsinki Commission Briefing on Tajikistan's Upcoming Presidential Elections
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**Testimony
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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

The Tajik government, in contrast to the unsteady regimes in neighboring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, appears on the surface to be moving toward greater rather than less stability. The upcoming November 6 presidential ballot in which Emomali Rahmonov will win reelection, is testimony to Tajikistan's transition from civil war to increasingly consolidated authoritarianism. Critically though, simmering discontent persists and, should President Rahmonov continue to repress meaningful political discourse, influential actors within Tajik society may seek alternative and revolutionary avenues of dissent such as Islam-centered mobilization or warlord politics.

State Repression of Political Opposition

Tajik political oppositionists confront regular state-led intimidation and repression. Executive-controlled agencies, notably the courts and the police, pursue oppositionists who pose a threat to the Rahmonov government. The result of this systematic intimidation is that recent Tajik elections, although they may appear competitive on the surface, are in reality one-sided affairs in which relative unknowns are added to the ballot so as to give President Rahmonov a patina of democratic legitimacy.

Executive imbalance has not always marked Tajik politics. The 1997 United Nations-brokered peace accords which ended five years of Tajik civil war assured the opposition thirty percent of all executive branch offices. Over the past decade, however, the Rahmonov government steadily evicted opposition elites from the administration while concomitantly undercutting the opposition's presence in the national parliament. Today Rahmonov loyalists occupy all important posts within the executive branch and over 90 percent of seats in the national parliament.

Opposition elites are not only barred from politics, they are imprisoned, fined, and in some cases, tortured. In 2005 Democratic Party leader, Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, was forcibly returned to Dushanbe from Moscow, convicted on corruption charges and sentenced to 23 years in prison. Iskandarov reports he has been repeatedly tortured while in custody. Yakub Salimov, another former Rahmonov supporter turned oppositionist, was similarly rendered from Russia in 2005 and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Prominent oppositionists are not the presidential administration's only targets. The executive sees journalists as equally suspect and, as such, here too Tajik courts are

enlisted to muzzle the media. In July 2005 Mukhtor Boqizoda, the editor of the newspaper, *Neru-i Sukhan*, was found guilty of libel for printing the article, “When Will Rahmonov Become Putin?” In August 2005 Boqizoda was convicted of illegally siphoning electricity and sentenced to two years detention.

The Iskandarov, Salimov and Boqizoda imprisonments are only three cases of what is a widespread and sustained government campaign against political dissent. The print media remains hobbled and now, in the run-up to the November presidential elections, the Tajik government is blocking independent internet sites such as the www.ferghana.ru, www.centrasia.ru, and www.tajikistantimes.ru. From the Rahmonov government’s perspective, this campaign is a success. All four of Rahmonov’s challengers in the November presidential elections are allies of the administration and the only expressions of discontent voters hear are statements similar to Socialist Party presidential candidate Abduhalim Gafforov’s lament, “it is difficult to run against Great Leader Emomali Rahmonov.”

Alternative Avenues of Dissent: Islam-Centered Mobilization and Warlord Politics

Barred from contesting politics through existing institutions, the Tajik opposition will likely pursue increasingly antiestablishment strategies. Despite President Rahmonov’s consolidation of executive rule, Tajikistan remains a fractured country. Many of the same factors which sparked the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war persist today and, in the case of Islamist and warlord politics, the preconditions of instability are greater now than in any period since the early 1990s.

Islam

Islam, as witnessed in neighboring Uzbekistan, throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and during Tajikistan’s own five years of armed conflict, provides a powerful ideology of resistance to authoritarian rule. In Tajikistan, Islamist opposition disappeared in the years immediately following the civil war once the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Tajikistan’s leading opposition movement, was guaranteed representation in the post-1997 reconciliation government. Today, though, with the IRP effectively expelled from the government, new Islam-centered opposition movements are again on the rise.

A large majority of moderate and small minority of radical Muslims understandably perceive the 1997 peace accord’s power-sharing agreement as a chimera. Determined not to be fooled again, a growing proportion of Muslims would prefer to see the revolutionary overthrow of the autocratic Rahmonov government rather than to wait for the unlikely possibility of peaceful incremental change. Western analysts are quick to equate such sentiments as evidence of increasing radical Islam. While the presence of Islamist groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* suggests that an element of extremism may exist, the more likely reality is that Tajik Muslims gravitate toward a form of liberation theology, motivated more by the overthrow of immoral autocracy than the establishment of conservative theocracy.

Warlord Politics

Perhaps even more threatening to the Rahmonov government than Islam-centered mobilization is the real potential of warlord politics. As he did with the leaders of the IRP, so too did Rahmonov integrate local warlords such as Kulob-based Gaffor Mirzoyev into the presidential administration in the initial years following the 1997 peace. Gradually though, Rahmonov has ousted these regional strongmen from positions within the national government, preferring instead to surround himself with an ever-narrowing circle of loyal elites. The result of this purge has been the reinvigoration of localized warlord politics and the de facto collapse of central authority in regions like Garm and Khujand. And, as was the case during the 1992-1997 civil war, it is conceivable that these regional strongmen, militarily armed and financially enriched by Tajikistan's booming narcotics trade, might find common cause with charismatic religious elites in seeking to overthrow the Rahmonov government.

Rahmonov's Hollow Victory

It is tempting to dismiss the November 6 Tajik presidential elections as a nonevent. This would be a mistake. Although Emomali Rahmonov is guaranteed victory, his choreographed ballot does not guarantee continued stability. Indeed, the opposite may be true. The paradox of Tajik politics is that the comparative calm of the past nine years has been the product of institutionalized dissent, of political pluralism however limited. The Tajik opposition, accorded a voice in government, abandoned their weapons and sought influence through the existing institutional framework. Now though, just as it appears Rahmonov has at last consolidated power by pushing the opposition out of government, the president's authority may be at its most precarious. Denied voice within the executive administration and the national parliament, the Tajik opposition may once again seek alternative, revolutionary and potentially violent forms of political protest.