

Tajikistan

Human rights conditions worsened in Tajikistan following political upheaval in neighboring Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 and violence in Uzbekistan in May. Concerned with possible domestic unrest, the government jailed opposition leaders and journalists on spurious charges. Ongoing state persecution of independent media led to the closure of key print and broadcast outlets.

Flawed parliamentary elections also marred Tajikistan's rights record in 2005. Although it noted improvements over previous elections, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) characterized the February 2005 polls as failing to meet international standards.

February Parliamentary Elections

According to the final report of the OSCE observation mission, the February 27, 2005, election for the lower house of parliament failed to meet international and domestic standards. In particular, the OSCE report cited the detention of key political leaders, government domination of the campaign process, and restrictions on independent media as significant obstacles to a free and fair election.

The OSCE report also noted improvements over previous elections in Tajikistan. The polling was peaceful and there was a measure of choice among candidates. Despite the restrictions on independent media, the OSCE determined that state media was "reasonably balanced" in the run-up to elections. However, the report noted that two state-owned newspapers refused to publish the OSCE's preliminary report on the election, even as a paid advertisement.

Observers noted serious problems with the polling process itself. OSCE monitors concluded that the counting process was "poor" or "very poor" at 54 percent of the polling stations they visited. Within five days of the first round of voting, four opposition parties announced that they would not recognize the results of the election, but their protest did not have a significant impact on domestic or international policies.

Political Opposition

As the February elections approached, the government began to pressure members of the political opposition. In August 2004, police raided the offices of the Taraqqiyot (Tajikistan Development) party after its members published an open letter accusing President Emomali Rakhmonov of practicing the "politics of genocide." The authorities seized documents they claimed insulted the president, which is criminalized in Tajikistan, and prosecutors charged the deputy chairman of the party, Rustam Faziev, the letter's author, with violating the lèse majesté law. In June 2005, a court sentenced Faziev to five years

and ten months in prison. At this writing, ailing party Chairman Sulton Kuvatov was due to face trial on the same charges pending improvement in his health.

In December 2004, Russian police arrested Mahmudi Iskandarov in Moscow at the request of Tajik authorities. The government had implicated Iskandarov—a vociferous critic of President Rakhmonov, presidential hopeful, and leader of the Tajik Democratic Party—in an attack on two government offices in Tojikobod in August 2004. Russian authorities released him on April 3, 2005, but he disappeared just two days later and eventually turned up in custody in Tajikistan. Iskandarov claimed that he had applied for refugee status after his initial release from Russian custody, but said that Russian police had kidnapped him off the street and transferred him to agents who flew him to Dushanbe. On October 5, 2005, after a trial that lasted more than two months, Iskandarov was found guilty on six counts, including terrorism and illegal possession of weapons. He was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison and fined 1.5 million soms (approximately U.S.\$470,000).

Prosecutors also charged a group of individuals, including Iskandarov's former driver, in connection with the attack. One of the defendants, Bakhtior Saidov, claimed at trial that investigators had tortured him and the other members of the group and forced them to plead guilty to the August 2004 attack. On October 4, 2005, all the men were found guilty and received sentences ranging from eleven to twenty-two years in prison.

After the uprising in Kyrgyzstan and public demonstrations in Uzbekistan, the government broadened its repression of dissident political activists. A court convicted Nizomiddin Begmatov and Nasimjon Shukurov, who ran as Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidates in the February 2005 parliamentary elections, on charges of hooliganism and sentenced them to twelve and eighteen months in prison, respectively. They were contesting the election on behalf of the party when they allegedly addressed a judge with foul language during a court hearing. The SDP leadership decried their conviction as political persecution.

The government also charged Saifiddin Faizov of the Islamic Renaissance Party with hooliganism for allegedly using foul language in a mosque. IRP leaders contend that the charges were meant to discredit their image in the majority-Muslim country and to punish Faizov for his work as an active campaigner in the February polls. Police briefly detained another IRP member, Abdulvose Abdujalilov, in July on charges of teaching Islam to minors without legal authorization.

Nongovernmental Organizations

In the wake of popular upheavals in a number of post-Soviet states, the Tajik government has become increasingly concerned about foreign sponsorship of civil society groups. On April 14, 2005, the Tajik foreign ministry announced that foreign embassies and aid organizations would have to report to the government their contacts with local political and civic activists. Under the new regulations, diplomats

and international organizations are required to give Tajik authorities advance notice of any meetings with local activists.

Press Freedom

The Tajik government uses a range of administrative methods to crack down on freedom of the press. In August 2004, for example, the government shut down Jionhon printing house, which published *Ruzi Nav*, another independent paper. Prosecutors have since charged the paper's editor, Rajabi Mirzo, with insulting the president. The paper remains out of print.

Tajikistan's practice of targeting the printing houses that publish opposition newspapers continued in 2005 with the January closure of the printing house that published *Nerui Sukeban*. Authorities also charged the paper's editor-in-chief, Mukhtor Bokizoda, with tax evasion, but eventually dropped the charges. In July, the government allowed the newspaper to reopen, but tax authorities shut it down again after only one issue.

Tajik regulatory authorities shut down two private broadcasters in April 2005, leaving the capital with no alternative to state television. The government ordered closure of TV Somonian because its license had apparently expired. TV Gul-i-Bodom was taken off the air over accusations that it had violated regulations on election coverage, but it was allowed to resume operations in July. Free press advocates regarded both closures as politically motivated.

In May 2005, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) reported allegations that the license applications of some thirty print and other media outlets were still pending. Some of these delays were due to the lack of a statute on broadcasting. A draft statute introduced by authorities in April 2005 was strongly opposed by independent broadcasters who believed the proposed legislation would open the door to Soviet-style censorship.

The state also engaged in repression of individual journalists. On April 24, 2005, authorities arrested independent reporter Jumaboi Tolibov in Aini on charges of hooliganism and resisting arrest. Free press advocates suspected he was detained for his criticism of the district prosecutor. The public outcry at this arrest was so great that, on June 8, a crowd of more than 120 people demonstrated in support of him. In July, a court in Shahrستان sentenced Tolibov to two years in prison for drunken behavior and abusing his government post as head of the legal department of a district administration.

In June 2005, the deputy editor-in-chief of *Nerui Sukeban*, Vahhob Odinaev, was accused of violating Tajikistan's press law in connection with a story that allegedly contained a libelous statement about a university professor. He was ultimately convicted, however, under a negligence statute. The court sentenced him to a year in prison and ordered the confiscation of 30 percent of his wages.

Key International Actors

On October 16, 2004, Russia and Tajikistan signed a bilateral agreement revising their security relationship. Under the terms of the agreement, Russia will maintain an important military base in the country. Most significantly, Russia agreed to hand over control of the Tajik-Afghan border entirely to Tajikistan. Russian troops abandoned the last border post on July 12, 2005, marking a substantial shift in the Russian-Tajik relationship. Russian forces had remained on the border after Tajik independence in 1991, ostensibly to stem the flow of drugs from Afghanistan.

The United States continues to weigh in on Tajik policy, expressing concern about detentions of dissident politicians and the lack of free press in the country. It is also an important source of foreign aid. In FY 2005, the United States disbursed an estimated U.S.\$43.6 million in assistance to Tajikistan. The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor characterized Tajikistan's human rights situation as "poor" in its 2004 report on the country, citing unfair elections, the use of torture, and poor prison conditions. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tajikistan in October and held talks with President Rakhmonov on the U.S. military presence in the region.

The European Union has been a major donor to Tajikistan since 1992. Tajikistan has received more aid per capita from the E.U. than any other Central Asian country during this period. In October 2004, Tajikistan and the E.U. signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which formalized closer ties between the two parties. An interim agreement governing trade was signed at the same time.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) maintains an office in Dushanbe that serves as a base for its monitoring and development activities. In addition to monitoring the 2005 parliamentary elections, the OSCE also has weighed in on governance and rights issues. OSCE chairman Dimitrij Rupel visited Tajikistan in April 2005, meeting with President Rakhmonov and urging the government to lift media restrictions and punish corruption. In September 2005, Miklos Haraszti, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, expressed concern that nothing had been done to address the closure of several independent newspapers by the Tajik government.

In September 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) criticized the Tajik government for breaking a pledge to the United Nations when it forcibly deported an Afghan woman and four of her children.