

## Tajikistan

Human rights conditions continued to worsen in Tajikistan in 2006. In the months preceding the November presidential election, the government cracked down on independent media and arrested political opposition members. Five political parties fielded candidates in the election, but the opposition remained weak and fractured and was unable to pose a serious threat to the re-election of the incumbent, Emomali Rahmonov. Said Abdullo Nuri, former Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) chairman and once a prominent political figure in Tajikistan, died on August 9, leaving the IRP without solid unified leadership, and in September the party decided not to field a candidate in the presidential election. Two other major opposition parties, the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the Social Democratic Party, also denounced the election and did not run candidates.

A crackdown on independent media continued, with applications for new and renewed broadcast licenses arbitrarily denied, and private television stations crippled by huge license and operating fees. Government concerns over foreign funding to nongovernmental organizations and the alleged increase in followers of extremist Muslim factions in Tajikistan led to two new draft laws that jeopardize freedom of association and religion.

### November Presidential Elections

Despite President Rahmonov's claim that the November presidential election would be free, transparent, and democratic, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that elections "were characterized by a marked absence of real competition." The OSCE also noted that "proxy voting and family voting remained a serious problem." Rahmonov has been in power since he was first elected president in 1994. A June 2003 referendum gave Rahmonov the possibility to stand for re-election for third and fourth terms, paving his way to rule the country up to 2020.

## **Political Arrests**

Government pressure on the opposition continued in 2006 with several arrests and the suspicious death of a member of the IRP. In February a court sentenced former opposition member Tojiddin Abdurakhmonov to 16 years' imprisonment for alleged involvement in a criminal group, murder, possession of weapons, and possession of forged documents. He denies these charges. In May Sadullo Marupov, a member of the IRP, allegedly committed suicide by jumping from the third floor of a police station in the northern town of Isfara. To date it remains unclear why Marupov was arrested. The IRP claimed the autopsy showed he had been ill-treated before his fall. Two officers were later arrested on suspicion of involvement in his death.

IRP leader Said Abdullo Nuri was at the time of his death in August reportedly facing slander charges brought in May for having alleged official corruption at a public utility.

## **Incommunicado Detention of Jailed Opposition Leader**

In October 2005 Democratic Party of Tajikistan leader Mahmadrusi Iskandarov was sentenced by a Dushanbe court to 23 years' imprisonment on terror-related charges. At the end of June 2006 party deputy chairman Jumaboi Niyozov accused the Tajik authorities of trying to hold Iskandarov in incommunicado detention; according to Niyozov, Iskandarov has not been allowed to see his relatives or his attorneys since his trial. Iskandarov is supposed to serve his sentence in a penal colony, but as of June was still being held in a Justice Ministry cell.

## **Nongovernmental Organizations**

The government continued to clamp down on the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding, particularly in the wake of the 2005 Andijan uprising in neighboring Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan's "tulip revolution." On December 2, 2005, the government introduced a draft law further reducing the freedom of NGOs to operate in Tajikistan. The law would impose mandatory state registration of public organizations and require all existing public organizations to re-register within three months. It would also grant the government excessive powers to monitor the activities of public organizations. At this writing, the draft law is pending in parliament.

## Media Freedom

In February 2006 the Ministry of Communications announced a plan (unimplemented at this writing) to establish a single government-controlled communications center to which all existing internet and cell phone providers must be connected. On October 5 the ministry blocked access to five websites, claiming they were a threat to “information security in the Republic of Tajikistan.” The five sites affected—centrasia.ru, ferghana.ru, tajikistantimes.ru, charogiruz.ru, and arianastorm.com—frequently carry articles critical of the government. Many believe this move was politically motivated. After much pressure from NGOs and the international community, the sites were unblocked on October 11.

Somonion TV, the only independent television station in the capital, Dushanbe, was effectively shut down in January because it failed to pay licensing fees 80 percent greater than stipulated by the original contract. The owner, Ikrom Mirzoev, claimed his company was being punished for having given fair access to opposition parties in the February 2005 parliamentary elections. According to the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, other independent television stations have also been brought to court by the communications ministry to recover licensing fees of up to US\$4,000; three TV stations in northern Tajikistan have already gone bankrupt. By contrast, state-run news agencies received a 25 percent increase in funding from the government.

On January 10 the government suspended BBC FM radio services to Tajikistan following a new law requiring international FM broadcasters to receive a license from the Ministry of Justice. The BBC was given 20 days to register, a procedure that usually takes up to six months. The Ministry of Justice denied that the BBC’s suspension had been politically motivated. In June the registration problems were reportedly resolved, but when the BBC applied for a broadcasting license in August, the Tajikistan Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting rejected the application, citing the absence of an applicable reciprocal agreement with the United Kingdom.

On September 18 Radio Liberty reporter Nosir Mamurzoda and Jamoliddin Sayfiddinov of Tajikistan’s Avesta news agency were detained and taken in for questioning in the southern city of Qorghan-Teppa while reporting on students

forced to work in cotton fields. Mamurzoda said they were released after a warning not to report news that “could destabilize the country.”

## **Freedom of Religion**

In March the government drafted a religions law that would seriously restrict religious freedoms, although at this writing parliament had postponed voting on the bill due to heavy criticism from religious communities. The law would make registration of all religious associations (a procedure requiring 200 signatures) mandatory. The law would impose state control over religious education, require state-approved higher education for all religious leaders, limit the number of mosques in Tajikistan, and impose state control over pilgrimages to Mecca. It would also ban teaching religion to children younger than seven, proselytism, and the leading of religious communities by foreigners.

In February 2006 the government announced that it would demolish the only remaining synagogue in Tajikistan, to make way for the Palace of the Nations, the intended residence of the Tajik president. The synagogue serves the Bukharian Jewish community in Dushanbe. Authorities demolished the ritual bathhouse, classroom, and kosher butchery, but halted further demolition after international outcry. The government has made no reparations for the damage, and it remains unclear whether it intends to resume demolition.

## **Key International Actors**

Tajikistan and China strengthened their relationship during a visit from Chinese Premier Jen Jaibao to Dushanbe in September 2006 for an economic meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with the signing of various bilateral cooperation agreements. In June 2006 Tajikistan and China signed a deal for the reconstruction of the Dushanbe-Chanak highway, and China provided Tajikistan with a long-term loan of \$281 million for implementation of the project.

The United States offered security and development assistance to Tajikistan in an attempt to increase its presence in Central Asia. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher visited Tajikistan in May, and then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

visited in July. Both failed to highlight human rights concerns and instead emphasized the US government's interest in expanding security and economic cooperation. In March the United States and Tajikistan signed an agreement to increase border security and law enforcement cooperation.

Sergei Mironov, chairman of Russia's Federation Council (upper house of parliament), visited Dushanbe in August 2006 to attend an inter-parliamentary forum. Many viewed the visit as a sign of Russia's support for Rahmonov in the November presidential election. At the parliamentary forum, Rahmonov commented that Russia is Tajikistan's main strategic ally. Also in August, Russian President Vladimir Putin met Rahmanov.

Tajikistan remains the greatest per capita beneficiary of European Commission assistance in Central Asia. However, the commission ended its humanitarian aid program to Tajikistan in June, making a final donation of US\$6.4 million. In May the European Union issued a statement during an OSCE Permanent Council meeting in Vienna welcoming President Rahmonov's commitment to holding free, transparent, and democratic elections in November, but noting with concern that consolidation of power in Tajikistan had come at the expense of transparency, democratic freedoms, and independent civil society.