Tajikistan

Capital: Dushanbe
Population: 8.2 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US$2,500

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators 2014.

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NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.
Tajikistanis born after their country gained independence nearly 23 years ago have only distant second-hand memories of the brutal civil war that engulfed their country during the early 1990s, resulting in possibly over 100,000 human casualties and contributing to a state of perpetual poverty and socioeconomic malaise. Currently, an estimated 16 percent of Tajikistan’s population lives and works abroad, mostly in Russia, sending billions of dollars annually to their home country. The steady outflow of economic migrants and the significant volume of remittances were key factors in maintaining Tajikistan’s political stability and macroeconomic growth in 2013.

It is highly probable that transparently administered elections in Tajikistan would demonstrate genuine public support for President Emomali Rahmon (in power since 1992), but the incumbent did not leave the November 2013 presidential elections to chance. His regime disqualified a key candidate, imprisoned one potential rival, sought the extradition of old and new opponents, and possibly ordered the kidnapping and murder of a critic. Much of this took place with the full compliance of the justice system, which is plagued by corruption and submissive to the executive branch. Civil society, meanwhile, remained generally docile—cowed by tacit government pressure and effectively discouraged from engagement on political issues by Western donors’ emphasis on “projects.” Despite harsh limitations on press freedom, Tajikistan’s independent journalists acted as de facto human rights activists during the year, shedding light on alleged violations of citizens and detainee rights by government structures.

National Democratic Governance. In an apparent effort to consolidate power in the run-up to the November 2013 presidential elections, the government targeted critics at home and abroad. Tajik authorities unsuccessfully pressed for the extradition of former prime minister Abdumalik Abdullojonov from Ukraine, and the State National Security Agency (GKNB) was likely complicit in the disappearance of government critic and ethnic-Uzbek activist Salimboy Shamsiddinov. Zaid Saidov, leader of the newly formed (unregistered) New Tajikistan Party, was arrested on dubious charges and sentenced to 26 years in prison in December. Meanwhile, Tajikistan remained the world’s most remittance-dependent country, with cronyism and mismanagement in government and in the economy exacerbating high levels of income disparity. Due to the state’s systematic repression of political pluralism, Tajikistan’s rating for national democratic governance declines from 6.25 to 6.50.

Electoral Process. President Rahmon won the carefully orchestrated November 2013 elections with a reported 84 percent of the vote, extending his mandate to
the year 2020. Opposition parties united to support the candidacy of human rights lawyer Oinihol Bobonazarova, but she was disqualified from running when she fell 8,000 signatures short of the 210,000-signature threshold for the nomination petition. The Central Commission for Election and Referenda (CCER) had also barred Tajikistan’s migrant population—many of whom are known to oppose the government—from participating in the nomination process. In general, the opposition lacked substantial and systematic support in the population, which remained largely apolitical, uninformed, and easily manipulated by government propaganda. In the wake of yet another “virtual” election devoid of genuine competition, Tajikistan’s rating for electoral process declines from 6.50 to 6.75.

Civil Society. In January 2013, a court in the city of Khujand upheld a previous ruling dissolving Amparo, an activist nongovernmental organization (NGO) representing the rights of military recruits, many of whom are coerced into conscription and/or brutally hazed. The government also closed down five of the country’s six officially sanctioned Islamic schools (madrasas) and continued to closely monitor and target members of the banned Jehovah’s Witnesses. Tajikistan’s rating for civil society remains unchanged at 6.25.

Independent Media. Intimidation and violence against journalists persisted throughout 2013 and the authorities periodically blocked social media and online news outlets. A new media law came into effect in March, guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression and banning censorship. Defamation and libel were decriminalized in 2012 and are now part of the civil code, but insulting the president or a public official remains a criminal offense. In the run-up to Rahmon’s reelection, international media reported that a growing number of young professionals were participating in energetic debates about the regime and elections over social media. Tajikistan’s rating for independent media remains unchanged at 6.25.

Local Democratic Governance. The strong prevalence of crony capitalism and the lack of a united opposition make democracy on the local level virtually non-existent in Tajikistan. Local parliaments, mayors, and district and provincial governors are the de facto appointees of the central government and the president. Despite changes in the law, including a 2009 Freedom-to-Farm decree, the production of cotton remains the major activity of many of the local households. Cotton farmers reap extremely small profits while a small handful of national and local elites profit from cotton cultivation and export. Outlying areas also remained cut off from electricity for much of the year, including most of the winter months. Tajikistan’s rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.00.

Judicial Framework and Independence. Throughout the year, Tajikistan’s security apparatus and judiciary failed to investigate what appeared to be systematic use of torture, mysterious deaths, disappearances and possible murders, and reported violations of due process. Reports of torture mounted in 2013, and
Prosecution of perpetrators were few despite its explicit inclusion and definition in changes to the criminal code the previous year. Tajikistan continued to deny access to prisons to independent bodies, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The government also refused to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), which would allow for a joint UN- and government-approved mechanism of prison inspections. Corruption is the main inhibitor to granting access to prisons. Tajikistan’s rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 6.25.

Corruption. Tajikistan consistently ranks poorly on all global surveys measuring corruption and related indicators. Nepotism, cronyism, and other practices such as extortion and bribe-seeking by government officials remained pervasive in 2013, with no signs of diminishing by the government or associated rent-seeking elites. Despite some positive activity by the State Anti-corruption Agency, which periodically arrested and prosecuted low- and mid-level officials, resistance to corruption by citizens rarely went beyond negotiating the exact size of the bribe or fine to be paid. Tajikistan’s rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.25.

Outlook for 2014. President Rahmon’s government has shown virtually no desire to improve democratic practices, enact institutional reforms, or increase political pluralism. Thus, it is likely that the authorities will maintain their continued harassment of members of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the two significant legally operating opposition parties. It is equally doubtful that any new opposition political forces will be allowed to form that would challenge the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in the expected February 2015 parliamentary elections. Income inequality will continue to rise, although the development of a new entrepreneurial generation, many of whom have gained extensive work experience in Russia, may lead to the establishment of more small and medium businesses. It remains unclear how the scheduled exit of American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops from Afghanistan will affect Tajikistan’s security or stability. The year may also see localized skirmishes in the east or northern parts of Tajikistan, whether related to the 2012 Khorog events, the drug trade, or the influence of extremist groups with links to Afghanistan.
In his New Year’s address, President Emomali Rahmon—in power since 1992—expressed hope that 2013 would be characterized by an “atmosphere of mutual understanding and unity.” The president’s wishes did not materialize, as the need to guarantee his reelection in November led to systematic repression of regime critics using the state’s security apparatus and corrupt judicial institutions.

Promising a return to stability and security after Tajikistan’s 1992–97 civil war, Rahmon and his inner circle gradually centralized political and economic power in the late 1990s, restricting political rights and civil liberties while exacerbating high levels of income disparity through cronyism and mismanagement of economic resources. The authoritarian governance style of Rahmon has in past few years gradually tightened the noose around the only legal Islamic party in the post-Soviet world, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), and prevented progressive voices—such as the Social Democrats—from promoting their ideas or joining the legislature. Rahmon’s regime has also monopolized the state mass media and pursued an ethnicity-based nation-building agenda under which non-ethnic Tajiks (who form around one-third of the population) have little representation in the government.

As the 2013 presidential elections approached, the regime used the various legal and extralegal means at its disposal to intimidate critics and eliminate potential rallying for the opposition. In some cases, it pursued opposition figures that had already left the country. Former prime minister (1992–93) and presidential candidate (1994) Abdumalik Abdullojonov—who fled Tajikistan in the mid-1990s due to accusations of involvement in a failed putsch and presidential assassination attempt—was detained in Kiev in February 2013 under an Interpol warrant. The Tajik government lobbied energetically for Abdullojonov’s extradition from Ukraine, but he was released after a few months in custody, probably due to the intervention of the United Nations and pressure from member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which Ukraine chaired in 2013. The United States, where Abdullojonov has lived since 1998, is thought to have fought to avoid the embarrassment of seeing its refugee resident subjected to a probable kangaroo trial, imprisonment, or torture by a key Central Asian ally. The U.S. maintains cooperation with Tajikistan on a number of international security platforms, mostly related to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, a country with which Tajikistan shares a 1,400 km border. Rahmon’s government tried unsuccessfully to extradite another of its exiled critics in 2013—businessman and opposition personality Umarali Quvvatov, who had been detained in Dubai in December 2012. However, Quvvatov was released nine months later.
Perceived regime threats inside the country were also targets in 2013. In March, Salimboy Shamsiddinov, the head of the Society of Uzbeks in Tajikistan’s Khatlon Province and an outspoken critic of the Tajik and Uzbek governments, went missing. After four months, it was announced that a body resembling Shamsiddinov’s had washed up on the shore of the Amu River in Uzbekistan. Circumstantial evidence convinced many that Shamsiddinov’s disappearance had been the work of Tajikistan’s notorious State National Security Agency (GKNB). The previous year, Shamsiddinov had been brutally beaten by unknown assailants near the GKNB’s provincial office just days after an interview in which he had accused the authorities in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan of committing “[cultural] genocide” through their treatment of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek minorities. The incident reportedly prompted no serious investigation. Shortly prior to his disappearance in 2013, Shamsiddinov had declared his intention of starting a political movement to promote ethnic Uzbek’s rights in Tajikistan. He had also publicly vowed to promote the candidacy of Social Democratic Party (SDP) leader Rahmatillo Zoirov if he chose to run for president in November.

In April, unknown assailants attacked the deputy head of the IRP, Mahmadali Haït. Haït told a Human Rights Watch (HRW) researcher that he had been under surveillance by the GKNB prior to his assault. Also in April, a small group of well-known and respected politicians, businessmen, and academics announced plans to form the New Tajikistan Party. One month later, the leader of this group, Zaid Saidov, a prominent businessman and Tajikistan’s industry minister until 2007, was arrested and eventually tried by the Supreme Court on a number of dubious criminal charges, including statutory rape, illegal deprivation of liberty, polygamy, bribery, and fraud. In December, Saidov was convicted and sentenced to 26 years in prison, and many of his multi-million dollar assets were confiscated by the state.

Although the last 15 years of relative stability have brought important infrastructural improvements—including the construction of roads, tunnels, and hydroelectricity plants—Tajikistan still has the postcommunist world’s lowest per capita income and its highest poverty rate, with over one-third of the population living on less than $2 a day. High annual macroeconomic growth (averaging 6.8 percent from 2009 to 2013) belies the true state of Tajikistan’s economy, which relies heavily on remittances from an estimated 1–1.5 million Tajik citizens living abroad, 90 percent of them in Russia. In 2013, Tajikistan was the most remittance-dependent country in the world, receiving $4.1 billion from citizens abroad—the equivalent of 48 percent of Tajikistan’s gross domestic product (GDP). High levels of domestic unemployment, underpaid public service positions, insufficient agricultural land, a poor economic climate, and the harassment of private businesses all encourage emigration. Meanwhile, Tajikistan’s remittance dependence makes the Rahmon regime vulnerable to Russia, which has in recent years attempted to re-exert its political and economic domination over Central Asia. Russia has periodically used the threat of deporting migrants as a trump card when dealing with Tajikistan. The sudden loss of income and return of over one-eighth of Tajikistan’s population could strike a crippling blow to the regime’s stability.
In a predictable landslide victory, President Rahmon was elected to a fourth term in office on 6 November 2013. In addition to systematic intimidation of potential rivals, the incumbent administration took advantage of its nearly absolute control over media coverage, the extremely high threshold for signatures required to participate, and the exclusion of migrant workers from the nomination process to cement its dominance over the electoral process.

Months before the elections, President Rahmon publicly promised European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso that the November elections would be “free, transparent, and democratic.” Instead, the election was another pre-orchestrated affair, including an improbable voter turnout of almost 90 percent. According to the Central Commission for Election and Referenda (CCER), whose members were appointed by the president, nearly 84 percent of voters cast their ballots for Rahmon, who ran as the official candidate of the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP). Election observers from the OSCE and the European Parliament noted “widespread proxy voting” and “indications of ballot box stuffing,” among other violations. The overall ballot count was determined to have been “bad” to “very bad” in about one-third of the 3,158 polling stations.

The Economist magazine reflected bitterly that “the mere presence of the 200-plus Western observers offers the ruling regime a degree of prestige and legitimacy” and questioned whether such large election missions were a proper use of $3–4 million of (mostly) Western taxpayers’ money to monitor a preordained, fraudulent event. Other observers note that Rahmon has shown no genuine interest in political or electoral reform and skillfully uses the presence of international cooperation as propaganda “to his own advantage.”

Most analysts agree that Rahmon’s victory was guaranteed from the outset, not only because of fraudulent vote-tallies, but also because it represents the will of an absolute majority of voters. Rahmon is widely regarded as the father of the post-Soviet Tajik nation, having brought peace and stability to his country against great odds and maintained it—often via repressive means—for over twenty years. Moreover, the regime has at its disposal a well-oiled propaganda machine that works tirelessly to make sure Rahmon and the PDP are the only political forces with name recognition or credibility on election day. Not satisfied with these odds, the regime also employed intimidation tactics, including imprisonment, beatings, and the suspected elimination of at least one regime opponent.

Candidates wishing to run in the election were given 25 days to collect signatures from at least 210,000 eligible voters—a requirement the genuine opposition figure was not able to meet. Respected human rights lawyer Oinihol Bobonazarova—whose appearance on the political scene as the joint candidate of Tajikistan’s main opposition parties and other personalities had caused quite a

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stir—fell 8,000 signatures short of the required threshold. Bobonazarova blamed her disqualification on the government’s intimidation tactics, including threats against three of her relatives, harassment of individuals signing the petition in favor of her candidacy, and the government’s refusal to properly cover her campaign in the state-run media. At the same time, Tajikistan’s large population of migrant workers—which the opposition claims is a key powerbase for them—was ruled ineligible to sign nomination lists.

In the end, the November election was a one-man race despite the presence of five ostensible opposition candidates on the ballot. According to historian Andrew Wilson, the use of “virtual” or “soft” opponents is a tactic used in a number of post-Soviet regimes to superficially satisfy domestic and international audiences that “a real contest is taking place.” Kirill Nourzhanov, another regional scholar, called President Rahmon’s rivals “bogus candidates” who “gracefully conceded defeat [while] calling the elections fair.”

In addition to clear election irregularities and a far-from-level playing field, the outcome of the race reflected a largely weak and apolitical civil society unwilling to mobilize resistance against the status quo. Some critics blamed the ineffective, disjointed, and weak opposition, accusing them of lacking clear goals and failing to unite political parties, civil society, and the population at large into a force capable of challenging the Rahmon regime. Some asserted that Bobonazarova’s failed candidacy was partially due to bickering among key opposition leaders, as well as the general population’s lack of interest in reformist ideas.

If Rahmon reaches the end of his seven-year mandate, he will have been in power for just under three decades. The opposition has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that Article 65 of Tajikistan’s constitution limits the president to two consecutive terms in office, but the servile Constitutional Court has provided a more flexible interpretation of the relevant text. In May, the parliament once again rejected electoral legislation proposed by a deputy from the opposition IRP. The proposed amendment would have required that precinct and district election commissions be composed of members of all eight registered political parties.

Civil Society

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In pre-Soviet days, traditional civil society in Central Asia centered around the masjid (mosque), choikhona (teahouse), and bazaar (market). These were venues for the exchange of ideas and communal cooperation referred to as hashar (assembling), a practice Soviet-era authorities also used in organizing communities. The mahalla (neighborhood or district) is another part of the region’s cultural history, and the Tajik government has acknowledged its significance. Since the adoption of the 2008 Law on Self-governing Social Institutions—ostensibly intended to encourage self-
reliance and access to foreign aid at the local level—mahalla committees are allowed to register as social organizations and have their own stamp and bank account. However, few mahalla committees have had the will and knowhow to establish formal organizations, and those forming organizations have not been free from government interference.\(^{31}\)

Alongside mahallas, thousands of registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have sprung up since the mid-1990s. However, due to limited foreign aid and, more importantly, the overall low capacity of the NGOs, only a fraction of them are functioning. Most operational NGOs can be described as service organizations, rather than civil society ones, and are normally engaged in implementing expensive, often redundant, projects funded by Western donors.

The Tajik government allows registered NGOs that deal with apolitical socioeconomic or “soft” human rights issues to function relatively freely. On the rare occasions when an NGO attempts to tackle politically sensitive issues like corruption or systematic human rights violations, repercussions are serious. In January 2013, a court in Khujand confirmed an October 2012 decision to dissolve the Amparo Association of Young Lawyers, an activist NGO that had advocated for the rights of military conscripts and challenged the common and illegal practice of press-ganging, physical abuse, and hazing in barracks.\(^{32}\) Amparo had also suggested a bill on alternative (non-military and noncombatant) service, which is permitted under the constitution but never actually allowed. Further work on these issues eventually might have jeopardized the possible millions of dollars that military personnel extort annually from young men and their parents trying to buy off or postpone mandatory military service.

Proselytization and religious activism, primarily by Islamic and Christian groups, appear to gravely concern the government, which has banned several religious groups over the last few years. Among the banned groups are the Islamic Jamoati Tabliq (Proselytization Society) and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In July 2013, the authorities also closed five of the country’s six officially sanctioned Islamic schools (madrasas), all located in northern Sughd province, citing the need to “bring order” to the schools’ documents and curricula. This left only one madrasa open for legal Islamic education in Tajikistan at the end of 2013.\(^{33}\)

The madrasa closures are another step in the government’s overhaul of religious worship and education that began with the 2009 Religion Law and the 2011 Parental Responsibility Law. Among other restrictions, these two laws established onerous registration requirements for religious groups and forbade children under 16 from attending most religious services. The 2011 law is specifically criticized for contributing to Tajikistan’s sociopolitical problems by eliminating religious and moral education without offering alternatives in a country that in 2012 had the largest “youth bulge” in the postcommunist world, with an estimated 39 percent of the population being 14 years or younger.\(^{34}\)

In September 2013, a court in Dushanbe fined a Tajikistani member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses for violating Article 474 of the Administrative Code, which sanctions “carrying out religious activities without state registration or re-registration
of the organization.” The case was filed by the GKNB, whose regular monitoring of religious groups had led them to barge into the accused’s home during a private Bible-study session. Among other arguments, the Ministry of Culture justifies the Jehovah’s Witness ban on the basis of the group’s tendency to avoid military service, despite the right to alternative (noncombatant) military service guaranteed in Tajikistan’s constitution.  

Independent Media

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With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan ranks better than any of its Central Asian neighbors in all global press freedom indexes. However, the conditions for independent media remain extremely poor. Journalists are inadequately trained and practice a high level of self-censorship. The government controls most printing presses, newsprint supplies, and broadcasting facilities, and television stations, state-owned or private, are only nominally independent. The authorities also blocked some critical websites and online news outlets, having continued these obstructions in the run-up to the 2013 presidential election. At the same time, public discussion via social media appeared to increase.

Independent media in Tajikistan have their origins in the Soviet glasnost era, when non-state sources of information began to operate. Today, the most widely read independent newspapers in Tajikistan are Asia-Plus, Nigoh (“Look”), and Farazh. The two largest state-owned newspapers, Jumhuriyat (“Republican”) and Sadoyi Mardum (“People’s Voice”), are not particularly popular, but local governments and many state employees are forced to purchase annual subscriptions.

Television is the country’s most prevalent medium. The broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television stations that praise Rahmon and deny coverage to independent or opposition points of view. There are also a dozen or more private stations, most focusing on entertainment.

Investigative journalism is rare in Tajikistan and the media practice a high degree of self-censorship in their coverage of top government officials, particularly the president and Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev, the second most powerful figure in the country. Ubaidulloev was appointed mayor of Dushanbe nearly 20 years ago and also acts as the head of the Majlisi Oli (“High Chamber” of the parliament). References to Rahmon or Ubaidulloev in the press usually come in the form of praise, while lower-ranking officials at times come under criticism “for not properly completing their tasks [as] instructed by the president or the mayor.”

Despite limitations and dangers associated with covering sensitive topics, independent journalists are increasingly inclined to report on issues of corruption, nepotism, and serious human rights violations. One such example during 2013 was an investigative piece by two Asia-Plus reporters covering the disappearance of the ethnic Uzbek activist Shamsiddinov.
After several years under discussion, a new Law on Periodicals and Other Mass Media came into effect in March 2013, replacing media legislation from 1990. The law promises media freedom, bans censorship, and obliges public officials to respond to inquiries posed by journalists within three days. The law also stipulates that all media outlets in Tajikistan must be registered as legal entities. Defamation and libel were decriminalized in mid-2012 and are now part of the civil code, but insulting the president or a public official remain criminal offenses.

In June, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media criticized Tajikistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for denying accreditation in December 2012 to Abduqayum Qayumov, a well-known local journalist working in Tajikistan for the Prague-based, U.S. government–owned broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). The OSCE also objected to the re-imprisonment of northern Asht district reporter Muhammadyusuf Ismoilov, who was sentenced to 11 years in a high-security prison on charges of extortion and fraud in October 2013. Ismoilov had already spent nearly a year in jail in 2010 on similar charges including “incitement of regional hatred,” before being freed and partially amnestied in 2011 following appeals from the international community.

There were also reports of intimidation and physical violence against journalists in 2013. In December, the authorities detained and beat Abdurahim Shukurov, a cameraman for the Ozodagon News Agency who had been covering the sentencing of the leader of the unregistered New Tajikistan Party, Zaid Saidov. Some bloggers also complained of threats from the authorities when they wrote critically about government officials or agencies. Blogger Rustam Gulov, for example, who wrote about the government’s illegal practices of forcibly extending young people’s military service, was reportedly detained by the police on multiple occasions. In Moscow, a Tajik opposition journalist, Bakhtiyor Sattori, survived what is speculated to have been a politically motivated stabbing in February.

Social networking sites are far more popular than pure news and information outlets. An estimated one million Tajikistanis visit social media sites such as Facebook and Odnoklasniki (Classmates) on a daily basis via their computers or mobile phones, where they discuss not only their personal lives but also cultural issues and politics. In the run-up to the election, BBC reported that a growing number of young professionals were participating in an energetic debate about the presidential elections through social media. Thus, despite the fraudulent nature of the 6 November elections and lack of objective coverage of its procedure and results, one observer called the elections “a milestone for social media discussions” in Tajikistan that may “facilitate social and political transformations in the long run.”

The government continued to block social media and news sites for extended periods of time during 2013. In January 2013, the state telecommunications agency reportedly ordered a block on several sites, including Facebook, local news sites TojNews and TopTJ, and the website of the Tajik service of RFE/RL (Radio Ozodi). The news sites had provided critical coverage of the government and speculated about the winner of presidential elections in November.
the government blocked YouTube for nearly ten days after a video from the site depicting President Rahmon’s son’s wedding, accompanied by commentary from Dodojon Atavulloev, a Moscow-based opposition journalist, appeared on the Kazakhstan-based satellite channel K+. Throughout the video, which went viral, Atavulloev made disparaging remarks about Rahmon’s demeanor and the supposed extravagance of the celebrations.

The president is an avid proponent of new technology, notwithstanding his warnings to Tajikistan’s youth to avoid excessive use of mobile phones, citing their costliness and harmful health effects. In the past six years, Rahmon has distributed thousands of computers to schools throughout the country, despite the fact that many of the same schools lack basic supplies, libraries, or the electricity needed to run the donated computers for much of the year. On National Youth Day (23 May), the president distributed over 2,000 iPads to a selected group of students. Critics accused Rahmon of attempting to buy the loyalty of the generally young social media crowd, and his actions created a new online catchphrase for attacking progovernment voices on social media: “You smell [of] iPad,” meaning “You have been bought off by President Rahmon.”

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There are three official tiers of local governance in Tajikistan: regions or provinces; districts and cities; and municipalities (jamoats), towns, and villages. By law, provincial, district, and jamoat parliaments are directly elected, but corrupt politics and the weakness of the opposition ensure that these governing bodies are made up exclusively of pro–ruling party members. District and province governors, appointed by the president, are among the most powerful local leaders, and although local parliaments hold a veto privilege, this right is hardly ever exercised. Ultimately, subnational “power brokers,” who are often off the radar of foreign observers, play a more significant role than most appointed or elected local officials on the local level.

An estimated three quarter of Tajikistan’s citizens live in rural areas where the main source of employment is agriculture. With the encouragement of international financial institutions, Tajikistan began eliminating formerly communist state-owned structures in the mid-1990s. The process of privatization, including land reform and agricultural privatization, has been contaminated by corruption and favoritism, leading some critics to label Tajikistan a “case study of post-Soviet crony capitalism.”

Tajikistan’s terrain is 93 percent mountainous, and arable land is extremely limited. Around half of the country’s irrigated lands are devoted to cotton production, an industry set up during the Soviet era. In 2009, a leaked U.S. Embassy cable referred to cotton production in Tajikistan as a “money-losing proposition.”
However, despite the inefficient and socially and environmentally destructive nature of cotton production in the Central Asia, Tajikistan’s government—at times with financial support from the World Bank—has been using “all available political and economic levers [at its disposal] to maintain the cotton monoculture.”

In 2013, the country reportedly harvested 393,000 tons of raw cotton, around 4 percent less than in 2012. The cotton crop accounted for 60 percent of all agricultural output and about one fifth of the total value of all exports. Although cotton sales totaled earnings of $245 million in 2013, few farmers profited from its production. Instead, most cotton farms remained closely tied to the domestic intermediary “cotton investment firms” that provide all inputs to the farm at inflated rates and hold rights to the final harvest.

In an apparent effort to satisfy Western critics of forced cotton cultivation, a 2009 Freedom-to-Farm decree guaranteed the right of farmers to grow the crop of their choice. In reality, forced cotton cultivation remains the norm. Many rural households do not possess landholder certificates and thus are ineligible to grow food crops. An additional problem has arisen since 2007, when the government approved changes to Tajikistan’s land code that allowed the mortgage of land use certificates in return for agricultural loans. Given the continued indebtedness of farms, thousands of rural households are at risk of losing their land to creditors.

There were some signs of possible progress in 2013. For example, Tajikistan produced over 650,000 tons of wheat, which was around 20 percent more than 2012. However, any improvement to the lives of local residents is not the result of improved governance at the local level, better local employment opportunities, or increased fairness in the distribution of land and cotton profits. Rather, it is a product of continued emigration and growing remittances sent home by family members working outside Tajikistan. There are also signs that the local population is beginning to utilize remittances and other economic sources for income-generating activities.

Despite Tajikistan’s ample water resources, the country is in virtual blackout during most of the coldest months of the year, particularly in rural areas. The president promised a quick turnaround in the production and supply of electricity with the planned construction of the Roghun hydroelectricity plant, for which the population supplied, often by force, over $800 million of funds by purchasing state bonds in 2010. During 2013, although Tajikistan allegedly had an electricity deficit of around 2.5 billion kWh, it reportedly exported up to 1 billion kWh to Afghanistan. Recent explorations by Russia and the Canadian company Tethys have reported findings of massive natural gas and potential petroleum reserves, which hint at future material benefits for the country.

### Judicial Framework and Independence

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Tajikistan’s judicial and law enforcement systems are deeply corrupt, exercise almost no independence, and, in virtually all cases, side with the state or the wealthy. Though the scale of repression has subsided since the civil war era, the “climate of impunity [still] prevails.” Law enforcement bodies, including the GKNB, routinely “solve” suspected criminal cases through intimidation, beatings, and torture.

Suspects in custody are entitled by law to be interrogated in the presence of a lawyer within 24 hours and must be brought before a judge within 72 hours to have the legality of their detention evaluated. Such rules and regulations are almost never followed by the police in their entirety, and they are often intentionally avoided by the GKNB. The undisclosed internal directives of the Interior Ministry and the GKNB regulating communication between defense lawyers and detainees—contrary to domestic and international law—almost always prevent defense attorneys from visiting the detained for days, or even months. These practices contribute to the vulnerability of suspects to physical and psychological abuse and torture-induced confessions. In February 2013, four policemen were accused of torturing a suspect, 28-year-old Bahromiddin Shodiev, with beatings and electrocution, which allegedly led to his death. Of the four men, however, only one received a sentence, and this was limited to a two-year detention for violating Article 316 of the criminal code, which penalizes “dereliction of duty.”

Article 88(3) of Tajikistan’s criminal code outlaws the “use of evidence in judicial proceedings obtained under torture.” However, the European Court of Human Rights, of which Tajikistan is not a member, has described a “disturbing situation” in the country, claiming that the use of torture is “systemic,” “widespread,” and “routine.” As a result, the court has declared the forceful return of suspects from its member states to Tajikistan to be a potential violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits torture.

Aside from a nine-month period in 2004–05, Tajikistan has consistently denied access to prisons to independent bodies including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In 2013, the government used familiar excuses and delay tactics to once again avoid ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), which would allow for a joint UN- and government-approved mechanism of prison inspections. While the main barrier to regular prison inspections is corruption within the penitentiary system leadership, the lack of concerted pressure from domestic civil society organizations or international funders also seriously inhibits progress on this matter.

Amnesty International reports the use of “batons, truncheons, sticks, and kicking and punching” by Tajikistan’s security forces to extract real or false confessions, as well as “use of electric shocks to the body, including the genitals; pouring boiling water on a detainee’s head; drenching with cold water; attaching plastic bottles filled with water or sand to the detainee’s genitals; [and] burning with cigarettes or chemicals.” Human rights defenders also report about cases of rape or rape threats against male and female detainees.

Abuse of this kind is also used to intimidate any who may seek legal redress. During 2013, there were at least four reported cases—one involving a child—where...
complaints to law enforcement officials about abuse and torture led to reprisals in the form of intimidation, ill-treatment, and torture in detention centers under the auspices of the Interior Ministry and GKNB.\textsuperscript{73}

In October 2013, the Tajik media gave attention to a court verdict against two detainees, Sadriddin Toshev and Sunnatullo Rizoev, whose previous prison sentences were extended by seven and nine years, respectively. The prisoners’ sentences were extended due to their alleged “dissemination of lies” about the use of torture by the penitentiary staff. Toshev and Rizoev claimed to have witnessed the 2012 beating to death of another detainee in a Dushanbe prison, Hamza Ikromzoda. Upon transfer to a correction facility in northern Khujand, the two claim to have been beaten by the prison staff alongside a number of other detainees.\textsuperscript{74}

Tajikistan’s judicial and security systems have also failed to adequately investigate incidents of mysterious deaths and possible disappearances, which many suspect are linked to security agencies and are de facto state policy. In 2011, rebel leader Alovuddin “Bedaki” Davlatov and up to seven of his followers were allegedly detained, tortured, and extrajudicially executed by GKNB agents, despite the government and the OSCE reporting that Bedaki and his men had died in a gun battle with government troops.\textsuperscript{75} In another case during a 2012 protest against the government in Khorog, the capital of Badakhshan, a regional representative of IRP, Sabzali Mamadrizoev, was abducted, tortured, and killed. Independent observers blamed the security forces for his killing. Sherik Karamkhudoev, another IRP official from Badakhshan, was also detained by the security forces during the 2012 Khorog clashes. In 2013, Karamkhudoev was tried and sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment on charges of “participating in mass disorder,” despite claims that his confession of guilt was extracted through torture.\textsuperscript{76}

Despite a climate of impunity as well as a lack of protection of human rights in practice, there have been a few positive steps in the legal sphere in the past decade. These include the 2004 moratorium on the death penalty, the criminalization of torture in 2012, the 2012 adoption of the Law on the Prevention of Violence in the Family, and the adoption of measures that are intended to provide protection for participants in criminal investigations as well as minimize or eliminate intimidation and pressure.\textsuperscript{77} In accordance with these positive steps, in May 2013, a Dushanbe court required the Interior Ministry to compensate a sum equivalent to $10,000 to the widow of Safarali Sangov, who had died from police beatings in 2011.\textsuperscript{78}

### Corruption

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The pervasive and longstanding corruption in Tajikistan’s government offices, law enforcement agencies, universities, hospitals, and businesses continues unabated. Corrupt practices remain a serious barrier to improving the economy, the education system, law enforcement, and good governance in general. Citizens appear to be
resigned to extortion, informal payments, illegal fines, and various other types of predatory behavior by government employees. Police officers and government bureaucrats openly seek or demand bribes from the general public, businesses, local and international organizations, resident foreign nationals, and even unsuspecting tourists.

Tajikistan consistently ranks poorly on all global surveys measuring corruption and related indicators. Transparency International’s 2013 *Corruption Perceptions Index* placed Tajikistan 154th out of 182 countries, alongside the Republic of Congo. Tajikistan was also ranked 143rd by the World Bank for its business environment, another indicator of government corruption. Other countries in the region performed significantly better on the World Bank’s *Doing Business* indicators—Kazakhstan ranked 50th and Kyrgyzstan ranked 68th. Tajikistan’s corruption ranking declined on the Heritage Foundation’s *Index of Economic Freedom*, which placed Tajikistan at 139th out of 178 countries. The Basel Institute’s 2013 index on money laundering ranks Tajikistan as the fourth worst country in the world for money laundering risk.

Government officials and well-connected elites highly value their business interests and use coercive tools and bureaucratic procedures to eliminate their business competitors and gain unfair advantages. In 2013, the U.S. Department of State reported that “government officials have in several notable cases leaned on judges to produce ‘correct’ outcomes in business disputes.” Unsurprisingly, connections to Rahmon himself are the most valuable of all. In 2013, the president’s son was appointed to the directorship of the State Customs Service. Individuals from Rahmon’s home region of Kulob are repeatedly appointed to a variety of lucrative government posts.

There is so much contradictory and overlapping legislation in Tajikistan, especially in taxation, that it is nearly impossible to be in full compliance with the law. As a result, businesses and individuals are constantly exposed to fines and vulnerable to being jailed, extorted, or stripped of their assets by the state tax office. Some of these charges have political motivations behind them, as exhibited most prominently by the 2013 imprisonment of businessman and aspiring politician Saidov on various charges, including corruption.

Everyday citizens regularly suffer from the actions of corrupt officials. As part of an ongoing program of charitable land distribution, 8,000 square kilometers were supposed to be distributed to impoverished farming families in southern Tajikistan’s Khatlon Province, but many residents reported being asked for bribes or offered unusable land while large plots were sold off at price. Meanwhile, corruption in the healthcare industry and the theft of donor funds intended to finance treatment of diseases like AIDS or tuberculosis has contributed to increasing rates of infectious diseases.

Resistance to corruption by citizens rarely goes beyond negotiating the exact size of the bribe or fine to be paid. Even indirect criticism of corruption can lead to government persecution. In July 2013, an elderly writer in Tajikistan had a book manuscript confiscated and was interrogated by security forces, likely due to his unflattering fictional portrayal of corrupt government officials in his stories.
Overall, little is being done to combat corruption. Anticorruption laws that are often the product of pressure from international organizations occasionally make their way into legislation, but their provisions are rarely put into practice. On the surface, the State Agency for Fighting Corruption and Economic Crimes appears to be a worthy entity with vigorous promotion of its goals. However, arrests and convictions of government employees and law enforcement officers on corruption charges do not extend beyond token low-level figures and fewer mid-level state employees. Powerful or well-connected individuals are rarely prosecuted or investigated. When they are, official measures taken against them are invariably a political maneuver rather than a response to corruption. Moreover, some anticorruption units are known to be highly corrupt, themselves.

1 International Organization for Migration (IOM), Tajik Migrants with Re-entry Bans to the Russian Federation (Dushanbe: IOM, 2014), http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/Tajik_Migrants_Report_15Jan.pdf. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, there are an estimated 1.15 million Tajik citizens working in Russia. Most sources report that 90 percent of all Tajik migrant workers abroad are in Russia. Thus, based on an estimated 1.27 million Tajik migrant workers primarily in Russia and Kazakhstan and a Tajikistan population of 8 million, Tajikistani migrant workers abroad constitute around 16 percent of the country’s population.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Nourzhanov, “Presidential Elections in Tajikistan: Emomali Rahmon’s Fourth Term at the Helm.”


38 Ibid.


Adinabay, “Changing Media and Politics in Tajikistan.”


Adinabay, “Changing Media and Politics in Tajikistan.”


Ibid.


“Cotton is No Longer a Strategic Crop for Tajikistan,” fibre2fashion.com.

Ibid.


United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Addendum:


70 UNHRC, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Addendum: Mission to Tajikistan.


77 AI, Memorandum for the Newly-Elected President of Tajikistan: Respect and Protect Human Rights Index.


89 For example, see the Agency’s official website: http://anticorruption.tj/.


91 U.S. Department of State, Tajikistan: 2013 Investment Climate Statement.