Tajikistan

*Capital:* Dushanbe  
*Population:* 7 million  
*GNI/capita, PPP:* US$2,140

Source: The data above were provided by The World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2012.*

### Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

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* Starting with the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

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.
Executive Summary

Tajikistan’s two decades of independence have been characterized by violence, poverty, autocratic leadership, and geostrategic vulnerability. The 1992–97 civil war between the communist-remnant government and the Islamist-led United Tajik Opposition (UTO) resulted in roughly 50,000 deaths, making it the deadliest conflict in the post-Soviet space, excluding Chechnya. Despite consistent annual economic growth since 1997 and signs of subsiding poverty (from a reported 72 percent of the population in 2003 to roughly 50 percent by the end of 2011), income inequality in Tajikistan has continued to widen, likely approaching pre-Soviet levels. President Emomali Rahmon and his People’s Democratic Party (PDP) have dominated politics in the country since 1992, increasingly sidelining the opposition and presiding over a regime characterized by cronyism and patronage.

Situated in a geologically active zone with frequent earthquakes, Tajikistan has been disproportionately affected by global warming, resulting in long periods of drought, increasingly hot summers, rapidly melting glaciers, and periodic floods and mudslides, which have also been induced by man-made deforestation. Meanwhile, a shared and porous 1,400-kilometer border with Afghanistan has put Tajikistan in an assailable position, vulnerable to extremism by osmosis and treated by Russia and the West as a strategic buffer zone against the flow of drugs, extremism, and terrorism. A sign of Tajikistan’s growing geostrategic importance is its role in the “northern distribution network” of states, which aids in delivery of supplies for the ongoing United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)–led war in Afghanistan.

National Democratic Governance. Apart from Islamists and some intellectuals, most Tajik citizens support President Emomali Rahmon, a former communist from the Soviet era, who favors secularism and a strong executive. Popular support of President Rahmon and the PDP is based on pragmatism, but also on an acknowledgement that despite ongoing socioeconomic problems, today’s Tajikistan enjoys a level of peace and security far beyond that of the civil war era. The government has successfully harnessed both ethnic Tajik nationalism and Islamic symbolism in its favor. However, evidence during the year pointed to the use of extrajudicial execution when security forces were sent to neutralize antigovernmental insurgents in January. Though the economy grew at an average annual rate of 6.5 percent during 2007–11, the growth can be largely attributed to remittances sent home by Tajik migrant workers, mostly in Russia. Tajikistan’s rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.25.
Electoral Process. Government-engineered parliamentary elections in 2010 gave only a semblance of pluralism to the lower house of parliament: of the 63 total seats, 55 went to the ruling PDP and progovernmental independent candidates. The opposition Islamist and Communist parties won two seats each, as did two progovernmental parties, the Party for Economic Reform and the Agrarian Party—both suspected of being government constructs. In anticipation of similar results, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) leader called for a boycott of the December 2011 parliamentary by-election. The government introduced no electoral reforms during the year, nor did it take steps to open up the political spectrum. Tajikistan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 6.50.

Civil Society. Formal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have mushroomed since the mid-1990s but remain mostly funds-rather than issue-driven. The government has been wary of foreign religious groups—especially the Islamic varieties, but also Christian missionaries—attempting to gain influence and converts. Among other restrictions, a 2011 law “On the responsibility of parents for upbringing and education of children” prohibits those younger than 18 from attending places of worship. Critics have warned of potential backlash due to excessive government control and coercion over both moderate and extremist Muslims, some of whom were sentenced to long prison terms during the year. The rating for civil society remains unchanged at 6.00.

Independent Media. Tajikistan’s relative media openness as compared to much of Central Asia took a turn for the worse in 2011. In January, the government filed a slander and insult suit against the country's largest private paper, Asia Plus, for publishing an investigative story on cases of alleged torture by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). A northern court imprisoned a reporter from Nuri Zindagi, a small district paper, for 11 months for having reported on credible allegations of corruption. In June, the authorities arrested a local British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist for alleged ties to the extremist Hizb ut-Tahrir group and tortured him to extract a confession. Tajikistan's rating for independent media worsens from 5.75 to 6.00.

Local Democratic Governance. As most local leaders are essentially presidential appointees, their main allegiance remains to the central government. Illegal land grabs and illicit exploitation of natural resources are rife. Over two-thirds of the population lives in agrarian regions, but poverty, skewed access to land, shrinking per capita arable land, an unwritten edict to cultivate cotton, and lack of access to fair credit have driven an estimated 1–1.5 million people to seek work abroad, primarily in Russia. In 2011, Tajikistan remained number one in the world in remittances as a share of gross domestic product (GDP), with just under US$3 billion reaching households in Tajikistan from relatives abroad. Migration has also had negative effects, including low economic productivity of those left behind, gender imbalance, and a resurgence of archaic traditions, with an estimated
10 percent of men engaging in polygamy. *Tajikistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.00.*

**Judicial Framework and Independence.** The courts remain overloaded, pressured by the executive branch, susceptible to corruption, and largely run by unqualified judges. Torture is endemic, especially in cases of suspected drug trafficking and membership in banned Islamist organizations. Torture-induced confessions and self-incrimination are routinely used as evidence in court. There were a number of deaths in detention in 2011. The government declared its intention to release 4,000 detainees and reduce the sentences of 11,000 others in a presidential amnesty marking 20 years of Tajikistan's independence; reportedly, nearly all prisoners amnestied under a similar presidential decree in 2010 had to pay bribes to be released. The government continued to deny access to detention centers by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and made no movement towards ratifying the United Nations Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. *Tajikistan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 6.25.*

**Corruption.** Poverty, weak rule of law, lack of coordinated public and civil society activism, misdirected foreign aid, and lack of political will to pursue anticorruption measures contributed to Tajikistan's high levels of corruption during the year. Many activities—from dealing with the traffic police to settling a case in court, ensuring entry into university, or seeking a military draft waiver—require illegal payments. Proximity to Afghanistan and collusion between organized crime and elements of the Tajik security services have led to a lucrative drug trade (mostly heroin), estimated to equal one-third of Tajikistan's GDP. Exports by Tajikistan's state-controlled aluminum and cotton industries generated over US$1 billion in 2011, only a small fraction of which returned to the national budget. Aluminum sales were associated with two murky Caribbean-registered companies controlled by Tajikistan's ruling elite. *The rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.25.*

**Outlook for 2012.** Skirmishes with a small number of armed Islamists to the east are a potential threat to Tajikistan's security. Continued lack of economic opportunities, a decrepit education system, excessive regulation of religious activities, and mistreatment by security services make the country's youth susceptible to recruitment by extremists. This threat may increase as the deadline for the departure of NATO forces from Afghanistan approaches. Relations with Russia—critical for maintaining a steady outflow of migrant workers and inflow of remittances—will be cautiously stable in 2012. Threats to Tajikistan's environment may increase as deforestation of mountainsides accelerates due to energy shortages, environmental mismanagement, and population growth. Key opportunities are international investment in hydro-power, natural gas, oil, gold, and silver, which should eventually bring significant revenues to government coffers. Having been selected as among the "top 10 best value destinations" for 2012 by the world's largest travel guidebook company, Tajikistan will see a rise in its tourism during the year.
In power since 1992, President Emomali Rahmon remains popular with the majority of the population, excluding Islamists and a minority of youth and intellectuals. Therefore, even in a hypothetically free and fair presidential election in November 2013, President Rahmon’s re-election remains almost guaranteed. Despite ongoing economic problems and outbursts of intermittent violence, today’s Tajikistan has undergone a vast improvement relative to two decades ago, when social and political turmoil led to a civil war (1992–97) with roughly 50,000 lives lost. President Rahmon has successfully harnessed nationalism—primarily of the ethnic Tajik variety—and, to a limited extent, religion (Hanafi Sunni Islam) as a means to win hearts and minds, maintain power, and ensure stability. In what was described as a “costly show of pomp,” the government spent US$210 million in 2011 to commemorate the country’s 20th anniversary of independence. Numerous schools and structures were refurbished and built, including the highest office building in the country, the largest library in Central Asia, and the tallest flagpole in the world.5

A survey released in 2010 revealed that about two-thirds of the population considers itself religious, about half attends mosque on a weekly basis, and an estimated 7 percent thinks that Tajikistan should become an Islamic republic.6 In the past few years, the government has attempted to neutralize its Islamist opponents (including those operating legally) by attempting to transform the secular state into a champion of Islam while simultaneously passing legislation to restrict and control activities of organized religion. Among other things, the government assigned 2009 as the year of the Imomi Azam (Greatest Imam, a.k.a. Abu Hanifa, founder of the Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence) and in 2011 introduced plans to build Central Asia’s largest mosque, financed mainly by Qatar, at a cost of US$100 million and with a capacity of 115,000 worshipers.7 At the same time, the authorities continued to detain and try suspected extremists.

A number of bold commentaries in 2011 were indirectly critical of President Rahmon’s rule. In December, the largest privately owned paper in the country, Asia Plus, credited Tajikistan’s socioeconomic problems to corruption, nepotism, and over-reliance on labor migration, all brought about by the “incompetence” of high-level government appointees who are periodically reshuffled by the president. Criticism was also raised against the government’s inability to provide much of the population with potable water, natural gas, and electricity as well as its lack of progress in building the much-promised Roghun hydroelectricity plant, for which US$185 million worth of shares were sold in 2010—often forcefully—to the population.8
Apparent success on the economic front has also been tenuous. Although the average annual increase in gross domestic product (GDP) during 2007–11 was 6.5 percent,9 this seemingly impressive figure reflects—as The Economist magazine once described Russia—a case of “economic growth without development and capitalism without democracy.”10 Tajikistan’s growth figures can be primarily attributed not to macroeconomic policies recommended by the International Monetary Fund, which have nevertheless been followed, but to the massive remittances sent home by Tajik citizens working abroad, mainly in Russia. Tajikistan remains highly dependent on Russia—albeit in an erratic relationship—for everything from employment for Tajik migrant workers to import of 90 percent of its fuel needs, while in return acting as a base for an estimated 5,500 Russian troops.11 Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that in November 2011 the government was unable to resist Russian pressure to release two Russian and Estonian commercial pilots who earlier in the year had illegally infiltrated Tajikistan’s airspace from Afghanistan.

The government has not always acted within the law when confronting its opponents. The death of Alovuddin Davlatov (a.k.a. Ali Bedaki) in 2011 is a case in point. Following a September 2010 ambush on an army truck in the eastern Gharm region in which reportedly 28 mostly young conscripts were massacred, the government placed the blame on Bedaki and another former United Tajik Opposition commander, Abdullo Rahimov (a.k.a. Mullo Abdullo, killed in April 2011), subsequently sending troops to neutralize their armed bands. In November 2010, the head of Tajikistan’s State Committee for National Security (GKNB) said that the operations in the east had “nearly ended and the small group of insurgents will soon be destroyed.”12 In January 2011, the authorities announced the death of Bedaki and seven of his comrades in a four-hour battle. By February, however, a mobile phone video was circulated among the public depicting a frightened, bearded, shirtless man bearing a striking resemblance to Bedaki, whose corpse the state TV had shown weeks earlier. In the video, he was alive and facing abuse and interrogation by what appeared to be Tajik security agents. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), which oversees the police, claimed the footage was “an ordinary fake,” while the head of Tajikistan’s National Security Council said that Bedaki was captured alive but died due to gunshot wounds on the way to the hospital. There remained credible evidence, however, that Bedaki’s death was not a result of a military operation or combat, but that he was “captured, tortured, and executed” extrajudicially by an arm of the executive branch.13

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<th>Electoral Process</th>
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Described as “a parody”14 by the leader of the opposition Communist Party (CP), Tajikistan’s 2010 parliamentary elections demonstrated the country’s lack of progress in adopting democratic norms after almost two decades of independence. Prior to
the elections, the U.S. Embassy had reported that: “Elections are unlikely to be free and fair, and public apathy and lackadaisical campaigning reflect the widespread lack of faith in the government’s commitment to democracy.”15 The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Parliament, which had sent 279 election monitors to Tajikistan—some argue wastefully and redundantly, at an estimated cost of US$2–3 million—reported afterwards that the elections had “failed to meet many […] international standards for democratic elections.”16

In 2011, Tajikistan’s multi-party system remained largely superficial, a “democratic façade,”17 tailored for the consumption of naïve Westerners. Still, it is also true that among the eight registered political parties, the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) has genuine popular support. This is unsurprising given the political and economic benefits it brings to the elite as well as government control of state media, with its unwritten policy of barring coverage of opposing viewpoints. The opposition includes the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), the CP, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Democratic Party. The IRP, led by the moderate Muhiaddin Kabiri, is the largest opposition party, claiming a membership of 40,000, but in reality it is far larger and growing in support. There are two categories of IRP supporters: devout and default. The devout are practicing, law-abiding Muslims who favor an eventual Islamic republic. The majority of IRP’s default supporters are secular Muslims who are not party members and do not aspire to an Islamic republic, but who vote for the party due to admiration for Kabiri or as an antiestablishment alternative. The Communists are mostly old-time Soviet nostalgics, whose numbers are rapidly dwindling. The SDP is comprised mostly of activist lawyers and professors scattered throughout Tajikistan; its membership is low, however, due to weak party strategy, a population not yet capable of digesting SDP’s progressive message, and government persecution of members. Though represented in parliament, the Party for Economic Reform and the Agrarian Party (AP), both formed in 2005, are in reality PDP annexes created or allowed to function as window dressing for a non-existent pluralism.

On 15 May 2011, a by-election was held in the Sino District of Tajikistan’s capital, Dushanbe (with 70,000 eligible voters in 48 polling stations) to fill a vacancy in the lower house. As expected, the ruling PDP candidate, former GKNB head, Amirqul Azimov, was victorious, garnering 62 percent of the vote. Those running against him were Tolibsho Saidzoda, an independent candidate and the editor-in-chief of the weekly Millat newspaper, who received 16 percent; Safarbek Mannonov, also an independent (9.9 percent); and Muzaffar Mirzoyev of the AP (7.6 percent).18 Both the IRP and the SDP expressed distrust in the by-election, refusing to register candidates. SDP leader, Rahmatillo Zoirov, claimed that the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER) rejected the party’s request for its members to be represented in the District Election Commission.19 According to the CCER, however, the May by-election was held in a transparent and democratic atmosphere. Moreover, it claimed to have fired a precinct commission member for having campaigned on behalf of Azimov, a violation flagged by Saidzoda, who later
filed a complaint claiming shortcomings and fraud by election workers. He also disputed the government’s claim that voter turnout was 81 percent, arguing it was closer to 20 percent—far below the required 50 percent participation threshold. Another seat of the lower house was vacated in October with the passing of Safarali Rajabov, representing the Shohmansur district of Dushanbe. The seat was filled through a flawed December by-election in which the Communists, the Islamists, and the SDP all refused to register candidates. The vote ended in a victory for Suhrob Sharipov, the ruling PDP nominee and former head of the Strategic Research Centre under the Presidential Apparatus.

### Civil Society

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By the mid-1990s, formal civil society associations in the form of Western-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began to mushroom in Tajikistan. As is the case in much of the developing world, where NGOs are headed by elites mainly “skilled at writing grant proposals” and having “little durability once the outside source of funds dries up,” most NGOs in Tajikistan have been of “peripheral significance” rather than serious bodies capable of affecting public policy. The funds- rather than issue-driven focus of Tajik civil society has led to ineffective projects, unscientific reports, excessive international travel for often redundant trainings and conferences, and a general ineptitude and unwillingness to properly monitor conditions in Tajikistan and challenge decrepit institutions. If anything, NGOs and their international donors have mostly confronted symptoms rather than dealing with core social and economic phenomena. For example, human trafficking, for which inordinate funding is available, has been dealt with cosmetically, without addressing underlying causes such as poverty, illiteracy, and a patriarchal culture that views women as subordinates, tolerates forced marriages, and condones polygamy.

In recent years, the government has been increasingly concerned about the influence and popularity of Islam and the spread of other religions. To regulate and control religious activities, in 2009 a new law “On freedom of conscience and religious associations” was passed, replacing the rather liberal religion law, which had been on the books since the perestroika period of the Soviet era. The government’s aim with this new law has been to combat real and perceived Islamic extremism, halt the successes of evangelical Christian missionaries, and defend, as it considers, the sovereignty and honor of the Tajik nation. In a February 2011 speech delivered to Tajikistan’s National Security Council, President Rahmon cautioned against the wayward religious instruction and unchecked sermons of imams (Muslim clerics), which could lead to radicalization of the country’s youth. He declared that the number of mosques in Tajikistan (nearly 5,000) surpasses schools (3,800) and referred to the skirmishes in the east as a result of lax government control over mosques. President
Rahmon urged the government to augment action against the 1,250 still-unregistered mosques. Among other measures, the government’s Committee on Religious Affairs limited the number of acceptable themes for Friday sermons to 52 and their length to 15 minutes. With regard to non-Islamic faiths, in July a meeting in Dushanbe of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (a group banned by the Ministry of Culture in 2007) was raided by GKNB agents, who temporarily detained and interrogated a number of believers and beat a disabled member from Uzbekistan, who was later deported.

Although the government denies it, since 2004 it has been using a fatwa (Muslim religious edict) issued by the chief state-sanctioned cleric to ban women from mosques. In addition, a new law “On the responsibility of parents for upbringing and education of children” was approved in July 2011, prohibiting children under 18 from attending places of worship. Despite criticism of the draft law by local religious leaders and Western governments (primarily the U.S.), there was no organized opposition to the bill by Tajik civil society. If anything, the draft law elicited overwhelmingly positive support when the government opened it to public debate, which was regularly broadcast on state television in the months prior to the parliamentary vote.

Some observers argue that the new law—in conjunction with the government’s heavy-handed tactics for controlling religion, including the imposition of limitations on the religious practice of ordinary citizens and imprisonment of hundreds of alleged Islamists in the past few years—will act as a self-fulfilling prophecy for promoting radicalism. The new law could backfire due to government interference, harassment, and unjust imprisonment of moderate Muslims. A ban on children’s attendance of mosques without alternative activities might also encourage lawlessness and hooliganism by frustrated, directionless, and undereducated youth—a description that fits a large segment of the estimated 2.5 million under-18-year-olds in Tajikistan. In addition to the new law on religion, in July 2011, the government amended the criminal code, putting in place a prison sentence of up to five years for those convicted of organizing illegal gatherings.

### Independent Media

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Reporters without Borders ranks Tajikistan’s media environment as the freest among the Central Asian states, excluding Kyrgyzstan. Events in 2011 indicate, however, that the gap between Tajikistan and its more authoritarian neighbors is narrowing. During the year, several newspapers faced slander and insult suits, while a number of journalists were targets of arrest, imprisonment, abuse, and prosecution.

Early in the year, Ramziya Mirzobekova, a reporter with Asia Plus, was summoned to the Prosecutor General’s Office and questioned about a 2010 article she had written about deaths in custody, in which she accused the MIA’s department for Prevention of Organized Crime (a.k.a. “Section Six”) of torture. In
late January, *Asia Plus* was sued for slander and insult by the head of Section Six, Anvar Taghoimurodov, who sought 1 million somonis (US$225,000) in damages and insinuated that Mirzobekova and her colleagues “probably had relations” with those guilty of the September 2010 suicide attack on Section Six headquarters in Khujand.27 Contrary to Article 29 of Tajikistan’s Law on Mass Media, Mirzobekova was also pressured—albeit unsuccessfully—by the Prosecutor’s Office to name her sources.28 In November, the two sides settled out of court.

Another case during the year involved the conviction of Muhammadyusuf Ismoilov, a reporter with *Nuri Zindagi*, a paper with circulation of 2,000 in the northern Ashx district. Ismoilov had been imprisoned since November 2010 on charges of slander, insult, “regional hatred” (fanning sectarianism), and extortion. In a story titled “Ashx is being destroyed. Who’s responsible?” Ismoilov had criticized the district mayor and his deputy along with a northern businessman with close ties to the authorities, accusing them of corruption, mismanagement, abuse of office, and illegal confiscation of agricultural lands. Extortion charges against Ismoilov were related to several planks of wood valued at around US$50, which he had received from a relative working in a government post, despite testimony that the unused wood had been donated to him.29 Additional charges against Ismoilov of regional hatred originated from his reporting on 140 hectares of district land that was put at the disposal of a Khujand businessman, while many Ashx residents remained landless.30 The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media called the arrest and prosecution of Ismoilov a result of “his professional journalistic work” and asked the Tajik authorities to “drop all charges” and “release him immediately.”31 In mid-October 2011, a court found Ismoilov guilty as charged, resulting in a three-year sentence (instead of the prosecution’s request of 16 years), and a fine of 38,500 somonis (US$7,100). As he had already served 11 months in prison and received a two-year reduction in his sentence under the Amnesty Law, Ismoilov was set free the same day, though he remains barred from practicing journalism for three years.32

The case that received the most attention during the year was that of Urunboi Usmonov, a reporter for the Uzbek language service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Usmonov was arrested in June on suspicion of membership in the Islamic extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (Freedom Party). He was allegedly tortured by Tajikistan’s GKNB agents and forced to sign a false confession and forfeit his right to counsel. Largely due to a BBC campaign, Usmonov’s case received a degree of attention unprecedented for Tajikistan, with a number of international organizations and western governments demanding his release, and some also asking for an investigation of torture allegations. This “systematic and united pressure” for Usmonov’s release took the authorities by surprise and prompted President Rahmon to personally interfere in the case, instructing Prosecutor General Sherkhon Salimzoda to set the reporter free until his trial, a request which was promptly fulfilled. What also helped this case was that it coincided with President Rahmon’s visit to Brussels, where the chairwoman of the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights, Heidi Hautala, had bluntly confronted Tajikistan’s ruler on the country’s human rights record.33
In October, the court found Usmonov guilty of possessing extremist literature and “failing to report a crime” (as he had not informed the police of his confidential Hizb ut-Tahrir sources). Usmonov was subsequently sentenced to three years’ imprisonment, but the judge set him free using the Amnesty Law. Four other men accused of Hizb ut-Tahrir membership and tried alongside him were not so lucky, receiving prison sentences of 20 to 22 years with confiscation of property. In December, the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists called for the decriminalization of slander and insult laws so as to bring Tajikistan “in line with international norms of press freedom.”

Local Democratic Governance

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In accordance with the constitution, Tajikistan’s president appoints province and district heads, including the mayor of Dushanbe. Elected parliaments of provinces and districts in turn approve the president’s appointments in rubberstamp fashion. In general, local leaders are not answerable to the populations they are meant to serve, and are preoccupied with maintaining their positions through satisfying the formal and informal demands of the central government. Some enrich themselves and their cronies through various means including illegal land grabs and illicit exploitation of natural resources.

Three-quarters of Tajikistan’s population lives in rural areas, many engaged in agriculture. Tajikistan’s agricultural productivity declined drastically after the fall of communism, and has yet to recover. Inequitable distribution of land combined with the highest crude birth rate (28 per 1,000 people) and the lowest per capita arable land (10.8 hectares per 100 people) among the former Soviet and communist world make it impossible for Tajikistan’s population to sustain itself through agriculture. Production in most commodities remains dismal: the average dairy cow in Tajikistan produces no more than 700 liters of milk per year, as compared to 2,000 liters in Kyrgyzstan and 3,500 in Russia; wheat yields are between 2 to 2.5 metric tons/hectare, about one-third the yields of many European countries. Although cotton is referred to as “white gold” and “strategic,” its cultivation in Tajikistan has become a cause of poverty, environmental degradation, and a throwback to pre-Soviet feudalism. Annual raw cotton production is now less than half the 1 million tons produced yearly in the last decade of communist rule, with per hectare yields having fallen to 1930s levels. Profits from the production and sale of cotton and, to a lesser extent, wheat grown on private collective farms normally bypass the average farmer and reach the pockets of the wealthy. Cotton production has damaged arable land, with various degrees of erosion and salinity due to poor irrigation and land overuse. Despite regional environmental damage, such as the shrinking of the Aral Sea, and the abject poverty of many cotton farming households, the World Bank has backed the government’s efforts with cotton-farming assistance projects.
Meanwhile, energy shortages and population pressures have led to the loss of an estimated 70 percent of Tajikistan’s meager forests since independence, leaving the country increasingly vulnerable to soil erosion, flooding, and mudslides.  

Tajikistan consumes as much as 1.6 million tons of grain per year, less than half of which is produced domestically. For most households, bread is part of every meal, constituting an estimated 60 percent of the average diet. A 2011 study determined that 26 percent of children in Tajikistan are hungry and malnourished, while at least two-thirds of the rural population lives far below the poverty threshold. Many argue that if farmers are granted land rights and freedom to sow the crop of their choice, coupled with modest technical and financial support, Tajikistan could nearly feed itself and gain significant foreign earnings through export of fruits and vegetables.

For much of the rural (and many urban) households, the main source of income is no longer farming but wire transfers from relatives, for the most part husbands and sons, working abroad. An estimated 1–1.5 million Tajik citizens (roughly 90 percent being males) have sought work abroad, primarily in Russia. Globally, India and China have greater remittances sent to them than any other state (US$58 billion and US$57 billion a year, respectively); as a share of GDP, however, Tajikistan’s remittances are the highest in the world—estimated at just under US$3 billion in 2011, or about 40 percent of its GDP. Despite overall economic benefits, migration has also had its downsides. The migrants themselves face demands for bribes by foreign authorities (the vast majority of Tajik migrants in Russia have no working papers), as well as the threat of ultranationalist xenophobic groups that harass and occasionally murder individuals perceived as being non-Slavic. Those left behind in Tajikistan endure their own hardships, with many children, for example, being forced to work in the bazaars and some dropping out of school, often filling in for fathers who have divorced their mothers and stopped sending remittances.

Due to the large-scale outmigration of males and the legacy of the civil war, Tajikistan has the largest share of female-headed households in Central Asia. However, due to the resurgence of archaic cultural mores since the end of communism, many females are discouraged from pursuing an education and forced to marry young, after which, they often face abandonment by their husbands, who may divorce them—in many instances over the phone—while away in Russia. Gender imbalance, poverty, and cultural susceptibility have also led to the revival of the pre-Soviet norm of polygamy: an estimated 10 percent of all men in Tajikistan have more than one wife. Although nearly all marriage ceremonies among Muslims (nikoh) are conducted by mullahs, second wives cannot be registered, leaving the women and resulting children with virtually no rights to property or alimony. The government’s feeble attempts to address this issue have failed to require a civil wedding certificate prior to nikoh as means of preventing polygamy. According to a prominent Tajik feminist, polygamy was also practiced, though clandestinely, in Soviet times; today, however, it is practiced to such an extent that “almost every government official has two or three wives.” Ironically, to improve women’s economic rights, some advocate legalizing polygamy in Tajikistan.
Judicial Framework and Independence

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Ongoing reforms to Tajikistan’s judiciary have been almost entirely on paper, with little actual implementation. Among other problems, law enforcement, courts, and penitentiaries remain corrupt and susceptible to influence. One commentary in 2011 reported that the public’s “hardest criticism” was of Tajikistan’s courts, which they see as lacking independence and delivering perpetually unfair rulings. Still, some steps taken in recent years may serve as beginnings for eventual behavior change. Among these are the appointment of Tajikistan’s first human rights ombudsman (2009), the long-delayed approval of a new criminal procedure code (2010), and the government’s invitation for a visit by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Torture (2011).

According to a coalition of Tajik NGOs, the average court in Tajikistan is overloaded with cases, pressured by the executive branch including the Prosecutor’s Office and the Council of Justice (which oversees judicial tenure), plagued by frequent staff turnover, and run by unqualified judges. Despite the transfer of sanction of arrest in the criminal code from the prosecutor to the judge, the prosecutor still determines detention terms and extension of sentences. And although Tajikistan’s constitution allows for the application of international law, it has never formed the basis of a court ruling. In addition, neither the government nor civil society has been able or willing to provide proper free legal representation for the majority of the poor.

A mid-level Tajik security official participating in an anti-torture roundtable in 2010 expressed a perspective on dealing with suspects that is typical among Tajikistan’s security and justice personnel: “If you don’t slap them a few times, they won’t confess!” According to Human Rights Watch, “Torture is practiced with near impunity” in Tajikistan and regularly used against individuals detained on suspicion of drug trafficking, membership in banned organizations, or petty robbery. According to Amnesty International, “confessions extracted under duress” are regularly used as evidence in court, and victims rarely report abuse out of “fear of repercussions.” Torture methods have included beatings, the pouring of boiling water on victims, the use of electric shocks, and rape. Torture primarily occurs in the initial stages of detention, when the victim is denied contact with family or a lawyer. By law, relatives of the detained must be informed of their whereabouts within 12 hours of arrest, but such formalities are rarely followed. Individuals may disappear for weeks or even months with no information provided to their families or lawyers.

In a 2011 commentary, Zafar Abdullayev, an outspoken journalist, said that a large number of Tajikistan’s police are “crooked, corrupt and even explicitly criminal […] or simply uneducated and uncivilized.” He also told of the “commonplace and systematic” abuse of ordinary citizens by police. Several persons died of injuries inflicted in police custody in 2011. In March, Safarali Sangov died in a Dushanbe
hospital due to massive bodily injuries likely inflicted in police custody. In June, Ismoil Bachajonov died in mysterious circumstances in a pre-trial facility. And in October, Bahromiddin Shodiyev died of massive wounds that many believe were the result of beatings in a police station. The police blamed Shodiyev’s injuries on a supposed suicide attempt, as well as pre-existing “multiple diseases of internal organs.” Publicity about this case, including from Tajikistan’s normally silent human rights ombudsman, led the authorities to conduct an investigation resulting in the dismissal of several officers, only one of whom was charged.52

Aside from a nine-month period in 2004, Tajikistan has consistently denied access to prisons to independent bodies including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), though international criticism did cause negotiations with the ICRC to resume in August 2011.53 The government has 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. The state penitentiary system is nominally under the control of the Justice Ministry and headed by a relative of President Rahmon, Lieutenant General Izzatullo Sharipov, described by the U.S. Embassy cables as “a notorious former warlord rumored to be both corrupt and cruel”54 and “involved in narcotics trafficking.”55 There is suspicion that the 19 main prisons of Tajikistan are collectively managed as a lucrative pyramidal fiefdom under his command. There have been 14 large-scale prisoner amnesties since Tajikistan’s independence, with the latest taking place in 2011 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Tajikistan’s independence. The government declared its intention to release 4,000 detainees and reduce the sentences of 11,000 others.56 The actual number of prisoners released or commuted was unknown at year’s end. According to Fattoh Saidov, head of the State Financial Control and Anticorruption Agency (formed in 2007), nearly all prisoners amnestied under a similar presidential decree in 2010 had to pay bribes to be released.57

Corruption

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Similar to other Central Asian states, Tajikistan suffers from rampant cronyism, patronage, and corruption. According to a 2010 survey funded by the United Nations and carried out by the Strategic Research Center under the President of Tajikistan, the public believes that the traffic police, heath care sector, educational institutions, and (ironically) the State Anticorruption Agency are the country’s most corrupt institutions.58

During the first three months of 2011, the State Anticorruption Agency reported 125 criminal acts of corruption involving universities, hospitals, and the police, 50 percent more compared to the same period in 2010. One case involved a Dushanbe police investigator paying the mother of an innocent man US$20,000
Illicit drugs, trafficked from Afghanistan (the source of 90 percent of the world’s heroin), have become so problematic that Tajikistan has been referred to as a “narco-state.” Tajikistan’s proximity to Afghanistan, a mountainous terrain, a porous border not easily policed, poverty, and organized criminal entities enjoying “systematic collusion” with the ruling elite allow for a drug trade that may be equivalent to as much as a third of Tajikistan’s GDP. It is claimed that many of the luxury homes that have mushroomed in Dushanbe are financed through drugs.

The five government agencies engaged in the lucrative enterprise of countering drug-trafficking are Tajikistan’s Drug Control Agency, the MIA, the GKNB, border guards, and the customs service—all known for their ruthlessness or corruption. International assistance by donors such as the OSCE and the United States on counternarcotics programs has had a limited effect and may even have been counterproductive by failing to take into account the “close relationship between the state and organized crime.” An International Crisis Group (ICG) report claimed that the drug trade in Tajikistan is conducted by “gangs headed or protected by high-ranking government officials.” Still, a small minority of competent and conscientious agents are also found among state agency ranks.

During 2011, Tajikistan exported an estimated 275,000 tons of aluminum and 105,000 tons of cotton fiber for earnings exceeding US$1 billion, equivalent to three-quarters of the country’s exports. Tajikistan’s annual budget receives roughly US$60 million from aluminum exports. The Tajik Aluminum Company (Talco), which consumes 40 percent of Tajikistan’s electricity and is blamed for the massive blackouts in outlying regions, is thought to be controlled by President Rahmon and a number of influential citizens, including the president’s brother-in-law, Hasan Asadullozoda, the richest man in Tajikistan. Talco’s production is sold through two highly opaque entities, Talco Management and CDH, registered in the British Virgin Islands. The ICG report described the siphoning of aluminum profits as part of a “kleptocracy centred on the presidential family.”

In recent years, local businesses have spoken openly against harassment, repeated inspections, and extortion by government agencies. In October 2011, President Rahmon ordered a three-year extension to a moratorium on tax inspections as means of increasing manufacturing and attracting domestic and foreign investment. He had issued a similar decree in 2008 due to complaints.

According to Transparency International’s 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, Tajikistan improved slightly in its score and ranking from the previous year.
World Bank’s *Doing Business 2012* report, which measures 10 factors affecting the environment for small to medium-sized businesses, Tajikistan ranked 147 out of 183 states, a better ranking than Uzbekistan (at 166), but far worse than Kyrgyzstan (70) and Kazakhstan (47). Four indicators on which Tajikistan ranked better than average were enforcing contracts, protecting investors, resolving insolvency, and starting a business; four indicators on which it ranked particularly poorly were dealing with construction permits, obtaining electricity, credit availability, and cross-border trade.\(^73\)

**Author: Payam Foroughi**

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“Таъджик Пирсон Нозирати афганистон ёвози боғи афар токдари кувонилган“ [Tajik Prison Head Detained on Bribery Charges], BBC Monitoring (Source: Asia Plus), 7 June 2011.

UNDP and CSSPRT, Corruption in Tajikistan: Public Opinion.


ICG, *Asia Report no. 205*.


In its 2011 *Corruption Perceptions Index*, Transparency International assigned Tajikistan a score of 2.3 (on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 representing the best) and a relatively low ranking of 152 out of 183 countries surveyed (http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/).