

Crushed Under Authoritarian Rule: Islam, State Power, and Religious Persecution in Tajikistan

Shaul M. Gabbay

Global Research Institute,

Posner Center for International Development, Denver, CO USA

ABSTRACT

This report delves into the pressing issue of human rights abuses in Tajikistan, shedding light on the authoritarian rule that governs the nation. The historical backdrop of Soviet rule and post-independence developments provide crucial context to understand the entrenched power structure. A grim picture emerges as we explore the stifling of freedom of expression and assembly, where dissent is met with repression and opposition is silenced. Media censorship and restrictions on independent journalism further erode democratic principles, leaving citizens devoid of unbiased information. Reports of torture, arbitrary detention, and a lack of due process underscore the disregard for the rule of law and the rights of individuals. This report emphasizes the importance of addressing religious persecution and the need for the international community's involvement to encourage democratic reform and improvements in human rights, paving the way for a brighter and more inclusive future for Tajikistan.

Keywords: Human rights, authoritarian, independence, repression, torture, censorship, persecution.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of Central Asia, Tajikistan stands as a nation with a turbulent history, transitioning from the clutches of Soviet rule to an independent state in 1991. However, this newfound independence did not pave the way for democratic governance; instead, it witnessed the rise of an authoritarian regime under President Emomali Rahmon. With an iron grip on power, Rahmon and his ruling elite have effectively stifled political opposition and limited the scope of political pluralism.

The status quo is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. Rahmon was re-elected president until 2027, and by all appearances is preparing for a dynastic transition of power. He appointed his eldest son, Rustam Emomali to chair the Upper House in 2020, the second-most important political position in the country. [1]

The political landscape in Tajikistan is marked by a centralized and personalized power structure, where key decisions are concentrated within the President's domain. Political opposition and dissent are systematically suppressed, and critics of the government are subject to harassment and imprisonment. Torture is a serious concern in detention. [1] The civil war that engulfed the nation from 1992 to 1997 left a deep scar on Tajik society, further cementing

the current regime's hold on power. While the conflict ended in a peace accord, it also laid the groundwork for the consolidation of authoritarian rule.

The state's authoritarian grip extends to its control over the media and freedom of expression. Independent journalism is stifled through censorship and harassment, leaving citizens with limited access to unbiased information. Reports of torture, arbitrary detention, and a lack of due process expose the grim reality faced by those who dare to challenge the regime's narrative. As Tajikistan grapples with an authoritarian rule, another concerning aspect casts a dark shadow over the nation's social fabric – the persecution of religious minorities. Despite its predominantly Muslim population (90%), [2] Tajikistan's government has imposed restrictions on Islamic religious practices outside state-approved institutions. The regime vehemently defends the secular nature of the state, dismissing any religious activity that falls beyond its narrow interpretation of authentic religious tradition.

Numerous religious minorities, not just Muslims but also various other faith communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Salafists (a tiny Muslim sect), Protestants and others suffer under the weight of the state's intolerance. [3] The government's crackdown on religious observance beyond state-run institutions has led to the marginalization of independent religious leaders and communities. These actions have effectively reduced the diversity of religious practices, creating an atmosphere of fear and oppression.

Moreover, the regime has banned and persecuted religious opposition groups, branding them as terrorists. [2] This move further erodes religious freedom and suppresses any dissenting voices within the religious community. The suppression of religious liberties not only infringes on fundamental human rights but also undermines the rich cultural heritage that has long defined Tajik society.

Addressing religious persecution in Tajikistan is of utmost importance, not just for the sake of upholding human rights but also to foster a climate of inclusivity and mutual respect. A vibrant and diverse religious landscape, where the rights of all faith communities are respected, could enhance social cohesion and stability.

The international community cannot remain indifferent to the plight of Tajikistan's citizens under the repressive rule. Diplomatic engagement, constructive dialogue, and support for civil society organizations and human rights defenders can play a crucial role in advocating for positive change. Leveraging international organizations and regional partnerships can add weight to calls for democratic reform and improvements in the human rights situation.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT FOR AUTHORITARIANISM IN TAJIKISTAN

The Legacy of Soviet Rule and Its Impact on Governance Structures

The echoes of the Soviet era reverberate through Tajikistan's modern-day political landscape, leaving an indelible mark on the nation's path to independence. Under the Soviet Union, Tajikistan was molded into a republic governed by the iron-fist of Moscow. The central authority wielded immense power, quashing any signs of dissent and suppressing political opposition. This top-down approach to governance instilled a culture of authoritarianism that would persist even after Tajikistan gained independence in 1991.

During the Soviet era, the Communist Party's supremacy was absolute, with little room for political pluralism. The system fostered a bureaucratic hierarchy that concentrated decision-making power in the hands of a few, leaving the majority of the population with limited participation in the governance process. This lack of inclusivity and political representation laid the groundwork for a future dominated by strongman rule.

Post-Independence Political Developments and Consolidation of Power

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan embarked on its journey towards self-governance and democratic ideals. However, the transition was fraught with challenges, particularly during the early years of independence. Political instability and factionalism marred the country's political landscape, leading to a bitter civil war that raged from 1992 to 1997.

In the aftermath of the civil war, while President Emomali Rahmon emerged as the victor and assumed the reins of power, he was forced by the still heavy hand of Russia to reconcile with the enemy Tajik Islamists and share power. "However, to continue the course toward national reconciliation would have required a lot of President Rakhmon and his closest allies. To make the arrangement last, Rakhmon would have had to countenance the idea of elections, of the possibility of giving someone else a shot at the nation's top post. But Rakhmon and his immediate circle pursued the opposite strategy instead: sidelining potential rivals, especially former military commanders who could prove dangerous again " [4]

Rahmon's presidency, which began in 1992, has extended for over three decades, making him one of the longest-serving leaders in the region. The post-independence era saw the gradual consolidation of power in the hands of Rahmon and his loyalists, creating an environment where opposition and dissent were met with repression.

The political developments post-independence further solidified the foundations of authoritarian rule in Tajikistan. The concentration of power in the executive branch, coupled with limited political pluralism, curtailed the potential for a vibrant and inclusive democratic system.

The Influence of Regional and Geopolitical Factors on Tajikistan's Governance

Tajikistan's geographical location amidst a complex web of regional and geopolitical interests has had a profound impact on its governance. Situated in Central Asia, the country is bordered by Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China. This strategic position has drawn the attention of major powers and regional actors, shaping Tajikistan's political landscape.

In the post-Soviet era, Tajikistan experienced numerous challenges, including spillover effects from the Afghan conflict and the rise of regional Islamist movements. The specter of extremism and terrorism further complicated the government's approach to governance and national security. To counter these perceived threats, the Tajikistani authorities intensified their control over political dissent and religious expression, employing measures to suppress any opposition. [5]

Moreover, Tajikistan's geopolitical context has influenced its relationships with major powers such as Russia and China. The country's heavy reliance on remittances from Tajik migrant

workers in Russia and economic cooperation with China has implications for its domestic politics and governance dynamics. [1] These ties have been leveraged by regional and international players to exert influence, often impacting Tajikistan's political direction. [6]

Tajikistan's historical journey from the Soviet era to post-independence has shaped the trajectory of its governance, paving the way for an entrenched authoritarian rule. The legacy of Soviet governance, the aftermath of a bitter civil war, and the complexities of regional and geopolitical interests have all contributed to the consolidation of power in the hands of President Emomali Rahmon and his ruling elite. Understanding these historical precedents is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by Tajikistan in its pursuit of democratic reform and human rights improvements. Only through acknowledging and addressing these historical factors can the international community hope to support the country's transition towards a more inclusive and democratic future. created.

SILENCING DISSENT: UNVEILING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Within the picturesque landscapes of Tajikistan lies a dark reality of systemic human rights abuses, casting a shadow over the nation's pursuit of democracy and freedom. [7] The authorities' grip on power has manifested in severe violations of fundamental human rights, particularly in the realms of freedom of voting, expression and assembly. "No segment of the population enjoys full political rights or electoral opportunities in practice. The regime, which seeks to suppress any genuine dissent, does not permit women, ethnic or racial minorities, LGBT+ individuals, or religious groups to organize independently to advance their political interests. Women remain underrepresented as voters and elected politicians." [8] Dissent is often met with harsh consequences, stifling any attempts to challenge the status quo. [7]

Freedom of expression, enshrined as a fundamental right in international human rights conventions, is severely restricted in Tajikistan. "The government controls nearly all media outlets and broadcasting facilities." [8] Independent media outlets face systematic censorship and harassment, leaving them unable to report on sensitive issues or criticize the government. Journalists and bloggers who dare to challenge the regime's narrative are subject to intimidation, arrests, and even violence, forcing many to self-censor or flee the country in fear for their lives. [7]

Similarly, freedom of assembly is tightly controlled by the authorities, with protests and public gatherings regularly met with forceful dispersals and arrests. The right to peaceful protest is a cornerstone of any democratic society, but in Tajikistan, it is met with suspicion and suppression. [8] Human rights activists, opposition members, and civil society leaders who organize peaceful demonstrations are branded as troublemakers, leading to further restrictions on their activities.

Media Censorship and Restrictions on Independent Journalism

Media freedom in Tajikistan exists in name only, as the government exerts its control over both traditional and online media outlets. Independent journalism faces relentless pressures from the authorities, who employ a range of tactics to silence dissenting voices. [9]

Critical journalists and media outlets often find themselves accused of spreading false information or undermining national security, with such charges carrying severe penalties.

Authorities use vague and arbitrary laws to justify media censorship, further shrinking the already narrow space for freedom of the press.

As a result, the media landscape in Tajikistan has become increasingly homogenous, dominated by pro-government outlets that echo the regime's perspectives. This lack of diverse and independent reporting deprives citizens of access to unbiased information, undermining their ability to make informed decisions and participate in public discourse. [9]

Reports of Torture, Arbitrary Detention, and Lack of Due Process

Reports of torture, arbitrary detention, and a lack of due process have marred Tajikistan's human rights record, revealing a deeply concerning disregard for the rule of law and the rights of citizens. Human rights organizations have documented numerous cases of individuals being subjected to torture and ill-treatment while in custody, with allegations of coerced confessions and forced testimonies.

Arbitrary detention is a common practice, particularly for political dissidents and opposition members. Detainees are often held without formal charges or access to legal representation, highlighting a lack of due process and the erosion of the right to a fair trial. [7]

The judicial system, which should serve as a safeguard for human rights, often acts as an extension of the ruling elite, further perpetuating impunity for those in power. The lack of independent oversight and accountability mechanisms exacerbates the cycle of human rights abuses and leaves victims without recourse. [2]

PERSECUTION OF RELIGIONS IN TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan authorities' tight grip on religious practices has resulted in the suppression of Islamic expressions outside state-approved institutions, the crackdown on religious minorities, and the outlawing and persecution of religious opposition groups. [10]

Suppression of Islamic Religious Practices Outside State-Approved Institutions

Tajikistan's predominantly Muslim population (90%) does not guarantee religious freedom for all. The government enforces strict control over Islamic religious practices, restricting them to state-approved institutions. Independent religious leaders and communities find themselves marginalized and subjected to harassment if they dare to practice their faith beyond the state's narrow interpretation. [7]

Mosques that operate outside the state's oversight are often labeled as centers of extremist ideology and are promptly shut down. This stringent control not only infringes upon the religious freedom of the Muslim majority but also undermines the country's rich Islamic heritage and diversity.

Crackdown on Religious Minorities and Their Rights

Religious minorities in Tajikistan face the brunt of discrimination and intolerance, with their rights systematically disregarded. The government's approach towards religious diversity is marked by suspicion, as minorities are perceived as potential threats to the regime's dominance.

Among these religious minorities are Christians, Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses, who suffer from systematic discrimination and persecution. Places of worship for these communities are often subjected to surveillance, raids, and closures. Proselytizing and public expressions of faith beyond state-approved parameters are prohibited, leaving religious minorities vulnerable to prosecution and social exclusion. [7]

The situation for the tiny remaining Jewish community is also grim. Historically a significant part of Tajikistan's diverse tapestry, the Jewish community has dwindled over the years due to emigration caused by persecution and economic hardships.

Outlawing and Persecution of Religious Opposition Groups

Beyond restricting religious practices, the Tajikistani government has taken an aggressive stance against religious opposition groups, particularly those that challenge the regime's authority. The most notable example is the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a once-legal, moderate Islamist opposition party. [10]

In the aftermath of the civil war, the IRPT was allowed to operate legally as part of a post-conflict peace accord. However, as the party's popularity grew, it posed a perceived threat to the ruling elite's grip on power. In 2015, the government accused the IRPT of involvement in a coup attempt and subsequently banned the party, branding it a terrorist organization.

The persecution of the IRPT involved mass arrests, trials marred by due process violations, and harsh sentences for party members. This crackdown on political and religious opposition sent a chilling message across Tajikistan, silencing any semblance of dissent and signaling the regime's determination to suppress religious-based challenges. [7]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Tajikistan stands as a nation grappling with deep-seated challenges of authoritarian rule, human rights abuses, and religious persecution. The country's turbulent history, from the legacy of Soviet rule to post-independence political developments, has paved the way for the consolidation of power in the hands of President Emomali Rahmon and his ruling elite.

The authoritarian regime's stronghold extends to stifling freedom of expression, pressuring independent journalism, and suppressing political opposition. Dissent is met with severe consequences, leading to a climate of fear and intimidation, where citizens are deprived of their basic rights.

At the same time, religious minorities in Tajikistan face discrimination and persecution, with the government imposing strict controls on religious practices outside state-approved institutions. This crackdown on religious diversity not only infringes on human rights but also undermines the country's rich cultural heritage.

The outlawing and persecution of religious opposition groups, such as the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, further illustrate the government's intolerance towards any challenge to its authority, be it political or religious.

Addressing the pressing issues of authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and religious persecution in Tajikistan requires collective action from both the government and the international community. Diplomatic engagement, constructive dialogue, and support for civil society organizations and human rights defenders can create avenues for positive change. The world must rally to advocate for democratic reform, uphold human rights, and foster a climate of inclusivity and mutual respect in Tajikistan.

Only through these concerted efforts can the nation hope to break free from the shackles of repression, embrace pluralism, and pave the way for a future where the voices of all Tajikistan's citizens are heard, and their rights are respected and protected.

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