
TAJIKISTAN'S POLITICS: CONFRONTATION OR CONSOLIDATION?

I. OVERVIEW

Tajikistan's hard-won peace and stability is at risk. Indeed, the agreement that ended the bloody civil war in 1997 seemed briefly under threat in early 2004 when a series of confrontations between President Emomali Rakhmonov and former warlords sharply increased tensions in the country's murky political life. As parliamentary elections approach in early 2005 the president seems intent on consolidating his power, at the expense not only of the warlords, but also of opposition groups, including the legal Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). But this has dangers. Discontent is finding expression in radical fringe Islamist groups, and the increasing strength of a small clique around the president makes any battle against corruption and criminality increasingly difficult.

Progress has been made in some areas. In 2000, few people ventured out on the streets at night, and shooting was still common. Now Dushanbe is a fairly bustling capital, increasingly host to international visitors and conferences. Economic growth of more than 10 per cent in 2003 partly reflects high commodity prices, but at least some of it is outside the traditional export sectors: cotton and aluminium. There has been some trickle-down to ordinary people. Sectors such as construction are providing jobs.

Nevertheless, the situation remains difficult. Poverty is evident everywhere, and much of the population remains partially dependent on international food aid. The economy still reflects its Soviet past, with too much state intervention and very little in the way of the rule of law. Corruption is almost universal, foreign investors rare.

Tackling the economy requires a robust political strategy that brings technocrats into government and starts to reform some of the most corrupt state structures, such as the police. But the political system is fragile, and warlordism and regionalism govern

much of its dynamic. Through the peace process, warlords on both sides retained effective control in many regions, including the Kulob-based Popular Front of Tajikistan (PFT) and the Islamist-democratic opposition (the United Tajik Opposition -- UTO), mostly based in the eastern Rasht Valley and the Pamirs. The president has gradually limited their powers and enforced the state's writ, but in some areas success has been only partial. These are positive steps towards a viable state, but instead of replacing warlords with a broader-based government, Rakhmonov's ruling circle is increasingly dominated by close allies, many from his home region.

The opposition in the civil war was a motley collection of parties, mixing democratic, Islamist and regional aspirations. Inclusion of the IRPT, as well as others from the UTO, was an important element in the peace, but much of this apparent pluralism has always been window-dressing. Although the end of the war was seen by many outsiders as a compromise resulting in coalition rule, many in the government regarded it as their victory over the Islamist opposition. Underlying hostility between the two sides remains evident. Continued pressure on the IRPT, and failure to draw a clear line between it and more radical Islamist groups, has sometimes threatened the basis of the peace.

All these tensions look likely to increase as parliamentary elections approach in February 2005, followed by presidential elections in 2006. Little is being done to avoid the malpractice of previous elections. Pressure on the secular opposition, a weak group of small parties, has increased, and few expect parliamentary elections to be free and fair: the ruling party is anticipated to win almost all the seats.¹

¹ More detailed background on the peace process and its aftermath can be found in previous ICG reports, especially ICG Asia Report N°30, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, 24 December 2001; and ICG Asia Report N°51, *Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development*, 24 April 2003.

II. RAKHMONOV AND THE WARLORDS

Since 1997 when the accords were signed, there have been occasional flare-ups of violence, particularly in the first few years, where the government found itself confronting former commanders from both sides who had refused to accept the agreement. On balance, however, the peace has largely held.² Yet, beneath the surface there are continued tensions between Rakhmonov and one-time leaders of both the ex-PFT and the ex-UTO.

Most of the PFT warlords, who put Rakhmonov into power, have not fared well. Some have been assassinated;³ others have been quietly isolated and rotated from the republic's command structures to less influential positions. A number have been arrested and imprisoned on various charges.

Beginning with more vulnerable individuals who lacked a strong following or a politically-significant regional base, Rakhmonov has gradually chosen more and more powerful targets -- increasingly, field commanders from the Kulob region. In January 2002 he dismissed two such former PFT leaders, Saidsho Shamolov and Qurbon Cholov, from their posts on the border defence committee.⁴ In January 2003 Cholov's brother, Sulaymon, formerly deputy chairman of Dushanbe's Customs Committee, was convicted of extortion, kidnapping, marrying a minor, and polygamy, and sentenced to six years in prison.⁵

A. THE MIRZOYEV AFFAIR

Apparently feeling increasingly secure, at the end of January 2004 Rakhmonov fired one of the last of these major warlords, General Ghaffor Mirzoyev -- popularly known as "Sedoi" ("Grey-haired"). Like Shamolov and the Cholov brothers, Mirzoyev is a former PFT field commander from Kulob. Since

1995, he had been in charge of the Presidential Guard, an elite unit which was instrumental in suppressing anti-government uprisings in the late 1990s. In 2001, he was appointed head of Tajikistan's Olympic Committee, and is said to have amassed a vast personal fortune.

Mirzoyev's dismissal capped an eventful period in which Rakhmonov had replaced dozens of officials at virtually all levels of government, effectively removing most of the few former opposition members left in power and increasing his own allies. Mirzoyev, apparently caught completely off-guard, vehemently protested his dismissal. Tensions mounted rapidly as some 200 officers of the Presidential Guard threatened to resign, and rumours of a military coup spread, though Mirzoyev denied he would take up arms. The situation in Kulob was of particular concern, where, according to a Western official, security forces were put on red alert.⁶ A heavy presence of security forces was likewise felt in certain neighbourhoods in Dushanbe. Apparently to defuse tension, Rakhmonov appointed Mirzoyev head of the State Narcotics Control Agency only days after firing him, which seems to have appeased the general and his supporters.⁷

Perhaps none too soon. By all accounts, the population of Kulob has been growing increasingly discontented with its lot. Having supplied many of the fighters who put Rakhmonov into power, it now feels that it was used and abandoned by the regime. This sense of marginalisation has grown as prominent Kulobis have been removed from power. "The Kulobis helped restore order in Tajikistan", said a Kulobi construction worker in Dushanbe. "Then they were abandoned. It's a good thing that most of the Kulobi hooligans are in Russia now, otherwise there could have been serious trouble, especially after Sedoi was fired".⁸ Another local interviewed by ICG said, "If two more days had gone by [without Mirzoyev's being given a new position], Kulob would have risen up".⁹

Despite such statements, there were apparently no major disturbances in Kulob in the aftermath of Mirzoyev's dismissal. And other residents were much

² Ibid.

³ One such was Safarali Kenjayev, founder of the PFT, who was assassinated in 1999.

⁴ "Tajik agency names sacked senior Tajik border guards", *Varorud* 21 January 2002. Shamolov and Cholov have allegedly been involved in a wide variety of criminal activities, including drugs and weapons trafficking, kidnapping, and murder.

⁵ RFE/RL Newswire 13 January 2002. Two other Cholov brothers are already in prison.

⁶ ICG interview, Kulob, February 2004.

⁷ The Drug Control Agency (DCA) was established with financial and logistical backing from the UN and international donors.

⁸ ICG interview, Dushanbe, February 2004.

⁹ ICG interview, Kulob, February 2004.

less concerned about the fate of their local warlord. "We were happy when he went", claimed one local. "He's done nothing for us over the years".¹⁰ This may reflect general discontent with supposed regional leaders. As one Kulobi said:

Mirzoyev made a big mistake. If he had used his money and his power to bring some good to Kulob, if he had bothered to build even one factory, then there would certainly have been demonstrations here when he was dismissed. But instead he decided to build a palace for himself, and so the common people here won't support him.¹¹

Probably the most immediate threat of conflict came not from a possible popular uprising, but from within the ruling elite itself, some of whom apparently argued for harsh pre-emptive measures against Mirzoyev and his forces. That could well have developed into a much more dangerous struggle.¹² Cooler heads, however, prevailed. Indeed, Rakhmonov's handling of the affair continued a long-standing strategy of seeking compromise with those former combatants still powerful enough to pose a potential challenge to the regime.

Another former PFT commander, Yoqub Salimov, represents a slightly different challenge. From 1992 to 1997, he held important posts in the Rakhmonov government and was one of Rakhmonov's most loyal allies, lending full support to the 1997 accords and personally saving the president's life during an assassination attempt in Khujand.¹³ But in the summer of 1997 he was implicated in an apparent mutiny and fled the country. He subsequently divided his time between residences in Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Salimov has established connections with members of the Tajik opposition residing outside

the country, a development which is only too typical of the fluid nature of political alliances in Tajikistan.

Russia arrested Salimov in 2003 on a request from Dushanbe. After eight months, he was extradited in early 2004 and is now held in the Ministry of State Security. No information has been made available about the charges he might face, a lack of transparency which has fuelled speculation about the motivations behind the case.¹⁴

Although Russia seems to have gained few obvious concessions, the most common theory holds that Salimov was extradited in return for an agreement by Tajikistan to allow a new Russian military base in the country. In fact, the case is problematic for Rakhmonov. A full trial could produce embarrassing disclosures, and there has been speculation that Rakhmonov plans to issue a full pardon to demonstrate magnanimity towards his former foes prior to the elections.

There is a constituency that would welcome this. In late April 2004, 1,634 of Salimov's supporters signed an open letter to the president, calling the allegations about involvement in a coup "baseless". Citing Salimov's long and devoted service to the president and his role in the peace process, the signatories asked that he be granted clemency.¹⁵

Salimov's fate remains unclear. Old allegiances are clearly no guarantor of continued solidarity. With the dismissal of Mirzoyev and the extradition of Salimov, only one major PFT warlord remains a key player: Suhrob Qosimov, commander of the Interior Ministry's Rapid Reaction Force and a close ally of Rakhmonov. He seems likely to remain untouchable for the foreseeable future.

B. ISKANDAROV AND THE OPPOSITION

Alongside tensions between Rakhmonov and his erstwhile allies, there has been confrontation with former leaders of the opposition. A case in point is the recent standoff with Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, a native of the Rasht Valley village of Tojikobod who became a prominent UTO field commander during the civil

¹⁰ ICG interview, Kulob, April 2004.

¹¹ ICG interview, Kulob, February 2004. The "palace" referred to is a large residence built by Mirzoyev on land appropriated from the erstwhile botanical garden of Kulob State University.

¹² ICG interviews, Dushanbe, February, April 2004.

¹³ On 30 April 1997, at a time of severely strained relations between Khujand and Dushanbe, two grenades were thrown at Rakhmonov when he arrived in Khujand to attend the 65th anniversary of a local university. Salimov reportedly pushed the president aside and covered him with his own body, allowing Rakhmonov to survive with only minor injuries. See Arkadii Dubnov, "Rakhmonov ne prostil svoego spazitelia" [Rakhmonov did not forgive his saviour], *Vremia novostei* 2 July 2003, available at www.materik.ru.

¹⁴ Officials involved in the case are evasive about details. ICG interview with Bahodur Hamidov, director of the Bureau for the Investigation of Grievous Crimes, Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 9 April 2004.

¹⁵ "Betarafi badtar az marg ast!" *Nerui Sukhan* 29 April 2004.

war. In 1999, he was given the rank of major general, and he served briefly as chairman of the State Committee on Emergency Situations. Also in that year he became head of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT). From 1999 to 2001, Iskandarov served as head of the state-run utilities firm, and from 2001 to 2003, head of the state gas company.

As with many prominent opposition figures, Iskandarov's relations with the government were often quite tense. In January 2003, for instance, he was twice detained by police following the arrest of his bodyguards, and it took direct interventions of Rakhmonov to free him.¹⁶ Later that year, on Iskandarov's urging, the DPT called for a boycott of a referendum on constitutional amendments that greatly increased Rakhmonov's power (see below),¹⁷ and Iskandarov himself denounced the referendum's outcome as fraudulent.¹⁸

On 28 November 2003, he was fired from the state gas company, allegedly for professional shortcomings.¹⁹ Iskandarov attributed this to his open criticism of the regime²⁰ and left the capital for his native Tojikobod, apparently concerned for his safety.

Joining Iskandarov in self-imposed exile was another former UTO field commander, Salamsho Muhabbatov. During the civil war, he led an armed group in the Vanj region of Badakhshon province, and in 1994 was appointed local commander of UTO forces there. In 1997, in accordance with the 30 per cent quota allotted to the opposition in the peace agreement, he was appointed head of the State Oil and Gas Committee.²¹

¹⁶ RFE/RL Newsline, 13 January 2003.

¹⁷ Interfax news agency, Moscow, in English 1028 gmt 16 June 2003.

¹⁸ Interfax news agency, Moscow, in English 0914 gmt 23 June 2003.

¹⁹ Tajik Television first channel, Dushanbe, in Tajik 0910 gmt 29 November 2003.

²⁰ Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mashhad, in Persian 1600 gmt 1 December 2003.

²¹ Muhabbatov's relations with Dushanbe had likewise been strained in the past. In 2001, two former subordinates, the brothers Sherali and Dovud Nazriyev, were arrested, convicted and executed for attempting to assassinate Dushanbe's mayor, Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev, the previous year, despite appeals from the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Muhabbatov told ICG in March 2004 that he himself had encouraged the Nazriyev brothers, who he said were innocent of the charges against them, to turn themselves

Upon Iskandarov and Muhabbatov's relocation to the Rasht Valley, alarming rumours circulated in Dushanbe that they were rallying their former comrades-in-arms and were in communication with disgruntled former government commanders. Influential international news sources reported that Iskandarov was seeking to create a political bloc of former field commanders. Interviewed by ICG in March 2004, he dismissed these allegations:

When I came to Gharm, naturally all my friends came to see me, to find out what the situation was. I even had my people call me from Moscow, saying, "Do you need us? Should we come?" I said no, of course not. I have no intention of starting a new war. But it's clearly in someone's interest to start spreading these rumours, saying "Mahmadruzi is gathering all the former commanders". This would give them a pretext to use force against us.²²

Iskandarov and his allies were seemingly concerned by the possibility of the government taking military action against them, and at least one former fighter in Gharm suggests they were talking seriously to possible allies, perhaps in case fighting should break out.²³ But there seems little support for any new military alliance in Gharm; war-weariness is the general tone of most former fighters there and appears (for the moment) to outweigh any hostility they might feel to the Rakhmonov regime.

As in the case of Mirzoyev, the affair ended peacefully. Iskandarov returned to Dushanbe, and according to his version, spent more than seven hours in conversation with Rakhmonov. He claims that the president, while not offering any specific position, had suggested that he come back to work for the government, a request which was declined.²⁴ Iskandarov has stated that he now plans to devote

into the authorities, and that their arrest, trial and execution were a ploy to tarnish his reputation. Muhabbatov claimed that his name had been on the list of those slated for arrest following the assassination but he was never summoned for interrogation. ICG interview with Salamsho Muhabbatov, Jirgatal, 30 March 2004.

²² ICG interview with Mahmadruzi Iskandarov, Tojikobod, 30 March 2004.

²³ ICG interview, former UTO fighter, Gharm, March 2004.

²⁴ ICG interview with Mahmadruzi Iskandarov, Dushanbe, 27 April 2004.

himself entirely to the work of the party and to run for parliament in 2005 and the presidency in 2006.²⁵

C. THE RAKHMONOV REGIME

The gradual decline of warlordism is to be welcomed. Yet, there are concerns about what might replace it. The Rakhmonov regime seems increasingly intent on arrogating as much power to itself as possible. In June 2003, citizens were asked to give a single 'yes' or 'no' vote on some 50 amendments to the constitution. The referenda involved minor changes, with one exception: a proposal to allow the president to serve two consecutive seven-year terms -- he had been limited to one -- with Rakhmonov's current term not counted. Not surprisingly, the referendum passed with a reported 96 per cent participation and over 90 per cent approval -- results which have garnered considerable suspicion from foreign observers. Rakhmonov seems to stand a good chance of serving as president until 2020.

While Rakhmonov averted potentially dangerous crises in the standoffs with Mirzoyev and Iskandarov, many people are concerned by how these conflicts were resolved and the emerging shape of his administration:

When Rakhmonov started making those personnel changes, he had the support of many people in the country. It looked as though he was serious about bringing in new people, about fighting corruption. But when he gave Mirzoyev a new position, he undid all the good that his previous changes had done.²⁶

And as Rakhmonov consolidates power, he has increasingly turned to a much narrower elite, often from his home town of Danghara, rather than broadening his circle to include more competent technocrats. Following Mirzoyev's dismissal, the Presidential Guard was reorganized into a National Guard, under the command of Colonel Rajabali Rahmonaliyev, a native of Danghara.

This influx of Dangharagis into government is resented in other regions, which feel increasingly

excluded. Regionalism is still a major factor in Tajik politics, and balancing the interests of different groups should be a priority for the government. However, when the leadership feels threatened it falls back on its most tried and trusted allies, relying on close kinship ties rather than political alliances. This is understandable, but in the long term will have a very negative impact on the political system. Not only does narrowing the elite exclude competent professionals from state service, it also raises discontent in other regional elites, thus exacerbating what was one of the major causes of the civil war.

One of Rakhmonov's greatest advantages has been his ability to avoid the appearance of any alternative leaders in the political elite. The only real challenger for his position remains the mayor of Dushanbe and speaker of the upper house of parliament, Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev. His relations with Rakhmonov are the subject of many rumours, but little clarity. He remains an authoritative figure in business in particular, and retains considerable political weight.

Although alternatives to Rakhmonov may be limited, he has been forced to back down over both Mirzoyev and Iskandarov, which may damage his credibility among the elite, and encourage those who would seek to challenge his authority. An observer commented:

It seems that [in the case of Mirzoyev] a crisis was averted. But the question is, what will happen the next time? Rakhmonov had to back down with Mirzoyev. He will have to back down with Iskandarov as well. We'll see if he backs down with Salimov. What message will this send to others who might have their own grudges with the government? This is very troubling indeed.²⁷

III. ALTERNATIVE OPPOSITION: THE ISLAMIC PARTY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Rakhmonov seems to be engaged in a dangerous game of brinkmanship with former allies and enemies alike. Though all sides have thus far proclaimed their dedication to maintaining peace and

²⁵ ICG interview with Mahmadrúzî Iskandarov, Dushanbe, 14 April 2004.

²⁶ ICG interview, Dushanbe, February 2004.

²⁷ ICG interview, Dushanbe, 4 March 2004.

stability, tension is high, and will probably only increase as the elections draw near.

While weeding out the warlords, Rakhmonov continues to face an alternative opposition in the shape of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. Alongside the IRPT, a number of illegal Islamist groups are also seeking support. Although their numbers are small, they have attracted support from young people and may pose a dangerous threat for future stability.

A. ISLAMIC RENAISSANCE PARTY

Relations are strained between the government and Tajikistan's most prominent opposition party, the IRPT. The 1997 peace accords legalised the IRPT and gave its leaders government posts. Nevertheless, it has faced continuing difficulties in some regions, particularly Kulob and neighbouring areas, where it was denied registration for years.²⁸ Negotiations between the OSCE and then Mayor Bobojon Murodov, ended the impasse, and the party was allowed to register on 11 October 2003,²⁹ but it still faces some problems in outlying areas.³⁰

The IRPT's regional difficulties seem to be the result of local officials jealous of their own power and not any coordinated policy. Yet other developments are rather more worrisome.

In May 2003 Shamsiddin Shamsiddinov, the IRPT's deputy chairperson, was arrested at his home in Chkalovsk, a suburb of Khujand, and charged with serious crimes (including forming a criminal group,

illegal border crossing, polygamy, murder, and treason) over more than ten years.

In mid-2003 another senior IRPT member, Qurbon Rahimov, was arrested and charged with offences including rape of a minor.³¹ And in a bizarre and troubling incident, in mid-September 2003 the state-run Khovar news agency claimed on its website that IRPT leader Said Abdullo Nuri had ordered the murder of IRPT member Sobirjon Begijonov, the head of Sughd province's Jabbor Rasulov region, for "disobedience." Khovar later withdrew the claim.³²

In January 2004, following a closed trial in the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court, Shamsiddinov was convicted on three counts and sentenced to sixteen years in prison.³³ In late April 2004, Rahimov received a sentence of nine years.³⁴

Following Shamsiddinov's conviction, *Najot*, the IRPT newspaper, published an open letter from Nuri to Prosecutor General Bobojon Bobokhonov that called Shamsiddinov's arrest a violation of the law on amnesty, and asked that he be pardoned in light of his services in establishing peace in Tajikistan. Bobokhonov replied that Shamsiddinov had led an illegal group with ties to foreign intelligence agencies and had been involved in dozens of major crimes, many of which were not covered by the amnesty.

Commenting on that reply, *Najot* asserted that the process was one-sided:

Come, let us put our hand on our heart and say honestly, which organisations and groups founded by both sides in those years were based on the law? The United Tajik Opposition? ... Or the "Popular Front" which ... brought the current government to power, and, as many articles published in the press have confirmed, committed dozens of serious crimes during those years, including genocide, ... which has

²⁸ Apparently the main opposition to the party's registration in Kulob came from mothers of those killed by the opposition during the civil war. They were reportedly organised by the then deputy mayor, Huronbi Vosiyeva.

²⁹ ICG interview, Kulob, February 2004.

³⁰ In the region of Khovaling, 90 kilometres from Kulob, local authorities refused to allow the IRPT to hold a founding conference and allegedly threatened its local representatives with criminal charges if they did not leave the party. Similar difficulties have been reported in the Vose region, also not far from Kulob. Despite these difficulties, the IRPT has been persistent, holding founding conferences this year in the Mu'minobod and Shuroobod districts near Kulob. IRPT representatives interviewed by ICG in Sughd province have complained of unequal media coverage and routine harassment of party members. ICG interviews with IRPT members in Kulob, Khujand, and Chorkuh, February-April 2004.

³¹ RFE/RL Newline, 24 July 2003. Rahimov's age (61) and reportedly poor health have led some to question the veracity of the charges.

³² RFE/RL Newline, 18 September 2003.

³³ Olim Sharifi, "Raisi shu'bai huquqii HNIT: 'Baroi ozodii Shamsiddinov talosh khozem kard!'", *Najot* 22 January 2004.

³⁴ "Hukmnoma", *Tojikiston* 29 April 2004.

been declared a crime against humanity. Was this not an illegal organisation?³⁵

In theory most crimes committed during the civil war were covered by a general amnesty. The amnesty law, a major condition of the 1997 peace accords, calls for criminal charges against former civil war combatants to be dropped, with the exception of certain serious crimes (such as the killing of non-combatants, rape, terrorism, and drugs smuggling).³⁶ The UTO submitted a list of 5,377 former combatants who were to be pardoned as part of their integration into state and military structures.³⁷

Clearly, the fact that the amnesty law excludes certain crimes, combined with the fact that the list of those to be amnestied only includes those who sought to join Tajikistan's military or state structures, leaves law enforcement agencies room for manoeuvre. Indeed, for the past few years the ministry of internal affairs has been quietly investigating the activities of former civil war combatants -- especially those from the opposition. Former opposition fighters have been summoned for interrogation by local law enforcement agencies, threatened with imprisonment, and released only upon paying a bribe. An example is the case of "Tohir", a former UTO fighter in Gharm who has been repeatedly called in for interrogation by the ministry; in early March 2004 he was threatened with imprisonment and released only after he agreed to pay U.S.\$2,000.³⁸

Many reported cases of arrest and intimidation of former opposition fighters seem to occur on the initiative of local law enforcement agencies, rather than reflecting state policy. In some cases, the motivations may be quite banal. IRPT Deputy Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri commented that a large part of the problem was the pressure on police to fulfil arrest quotas and to gain bribes.³⁹

IRPT chairman Nuri offered a similar assessment:

³⁵ "Ba sozishnomai sulh va digar asnodi on ehtiroim guzorem!" ["Let us respect the peace treaty and its other documents!"], *Najot* 12 February 2004.

³⁶ "Qonuni avfi ishtirokkunandagoni muqovimati siyosî va nizomî dar Tojikiston," in *Payki oshî (sanadho)*, Dushanbe: Nashriyoti Oli Somoniyon, 1998, 54-55.

³⁷ "Ba sozishnomai sulh," op. cit.

³⁸ ICG interview with "Tohir," former UTO field commander, Gharm, March 2004.

³⁹ ICG interview with Muhiddin Kabiri, deputy chairperson of Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, 12 April 2004.

Those who made peace, from both the government and the opposition, always consider peace to be the most important thing of all. But others have appeared in law enforcement since then, and most of them had no role in bringing about peace. They don't understand the meaning of peace, or what can destroy it... Their basic goal, it seems to me, is not to solve crimes, but to earn money.⁴⁰

A senior official from the Prosecutor General's office has denied that former opposition fighters are singled out for investigation.

If there are those who say the law on amnesty is being violated, let them bring concrete facts, and we will look into it. The fact is that some people committed serious crimes *after* the amnesty period. These are the ones we're currently investigating.⁴¹

A high-ranking official of the ministry of internal affairs confirmed to ICG that the ministry was indeed investigating past crimes but denied that this violated the law on amnesty. According to the official, those who confessed to crimes covered by the amnesty law were automatically pardoned and their cases closed -- provided they were on the list submitted by the opposition. Investigations were ongoing, the official stated, only when the accused were contesting the charges, were accused of crimes not covered by the amnesty or committed after 1997, or were not on the opposition's list. People such as Mahmadrusi Iskandarov were simply "playing on the juridical ignorance of the population", seeking to "create a crisis situation" by falsely accusing law-enforcement agencies of violating the law.⁴²

Ignorance of the law, however, can work both ways. It may be that local law enforcement officials are using the threat of imprisonment to intimidate former opposition fighters who are not fully aware of their rights. At the very least, this would put serious pressure on former fighters and violate at least the spirit of the amnesty.

⁴⁰ ICG interview with Said Abdullo Nuri, chairperson of Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, 7 April 2004.

⁴¹ ICG interview with Bahodur Hamidov, director of the Bureau for the Investigation of Grievous Crimes, Prosecutor General's Office, Dushanbe, 9 April 2004.

⁴² ICG interview with senior official of ministry of internal affairs, April 2004.

In the spring of 2004 rumours of impending mass arrests by the ministry of internal affairs reportedly spurred former UTO fighters to flee from Tojikobod into the hills. This group, numbering perhaps as many as 100, is said still to be in hiding but unarmed, a claim difficult to verify.⁴³

Whether or not this is the case, and the ongoing investigations of former opposition fighters are government policy, it seems clear that such incidents can only increase the mistrust ex-combatants might feel towards the Rakhmonov regime. At the best, they are out of keeping with the official rhetoric of "forgiving and forgetting" that predominates in state discourse. Memories of the civil war are very much alive in Rasht. Iskandarov said:

We have information about them [pro-government forces] as well. We know where there are graves with 300, 400 people buried in them, people they killed. But we don't say anything about this for the sake of peace.⁴⁴

One section of the cemetery in a village in Gharm district is full of the graves of civil war victims - in some cases, entire families. The dates on the headstones tell a grim story; on one after another, for young and old alike, the year of death is the same: 1993. Not far from this village a small roadside shrine marks where dozens of refugees -- men, women, and children -- were killed in a February 1993 air strike and buried in a mass grave. Farther away, a similar shrine stands by a bridge in the village of Sayron, between Tojikobod and Jirgatol, where, again in 1993, government forces killed hundreds of refugees in a single day. Asked if he was willing to forgive, former fighter "Tohir" was silent for a long moment, then replied: "For the sake of my children and their future, I'm ready to forgive. But [this government] won't let me".⁴⁵

Continuing pressure on the opposition may have dangerous consequences for Tajikistan's stability. There was no official process, such as a Truth

Commission, that might have gone some way to reconciling former opponents. Other processes, such as the Inter-Tajik dialogue, seem to have lost their initial energy.

Yet steps can be taken to defuse the tension. Allegations of local authorities violating the 1997 amnesty law must be taken seriously and thoroughly investigated by the government. Even the appearance that only UTO combatants are targeted needs to be avoided. The former opposition should provide detailed information about violations but not take advantage of what may be isolated incidents to exacerbate strained relations. Mahmadrusi Iskandarov has recently declared his intention to take up amnesty violations with respect to former UTO combatants and reportedly has compiled a list of more than 300 cases to submit to the president. "If the president doesn't solve this problem", he said, "I think that all trust in this government will be lost".⁴⁶

Memories of the civil war have ensured that all sides have stepped back from the brink when violence has threatened. Refusal to accept a repeat of the civil war remains a powerful deterrent. But few have forgotten, much less forgiven. As time goes on, memories of the horrors of that conflict may fade while resentments increase.

B. ISFARA AND RADICAL ISLAM?

While pressure on the IRPT continues, more radical supporters of political Islam seem to be emerging in illegal groupings. Reports have grown in 2004 about one such group in the northern region of Isfara, a deeply conservative area which is now a main IRPT support base.

Tensions in Isfara, a city with a reputation for religious activism, have been on the rise in recent years. In the summer of 2002, it was revealed that among the detainees at the U.S. "Camp X-Ray" at Guantánamo, Cuba, were three young Tajik men from there.⁴⁷ Speaking in the city in July of that year, Rakhmonov denounced local officials for allowing "extremist" groups to proliferate, citing the existence in Isfara alone of 152 mosques, as opposed to only 82 schools, serving a population of some 200,000. Many of the mosques, the president claimed, were

⁴³ ICG interviews, Gharm, Tojikobod, Jirgatol, 29-31 March 2004.

⁴⁴ ICG interview with Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, Tojikobod, 30 March 2004.

⁴⁵ ICG interview with former UTO field commander, Gharm, 31 March 2004. Monuments to the victims of opposition atrocities abound in southern Tajikistan, particularly in and around the city of Qurghonteppa, scene of the worst violence in the early phase of the civil war. Psychological wounds on both sides have yet to heal fully.

⁴⁶ ICG interview with Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, 27 April 2004.

⁴⁷ BBC Monitoring International Reports, 1 August 2002, <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/>.

not registered and so violated the law on religious organisations, which allows only one mosque per 15,000 people.⁴⁸

Rakhmonov's comments marked the beginning of a crackdown on religious activists in Isfara, with dozens of mosques closed and imams removed. Also closed was the local Salmoni Fors religious school (*madrasa*).⁴⁹ In November 2002, Isfara's prosecutor announced that 63 clergymen (including nine IRPT members) faced charges of violating laws on political parties and religious organisations.⁵⁰ More recently, a reported 1,000 young women from Isfara have been refused internal passports (the basic form of identification in Tajikistan) for refusing to be photographed without their headscarves.⁵¹

On 12 January 2004 Sergei Bessarab, a Baptist missionary and pastor in the city, was shot and killed while at prayer in his church.⁵² He had previously served prison terms for car theft and narcotics violations⁵³ and apparently converted to Evangelical Baptism in prison.⁵⁴ Bessarab and his wife were active proselytizers, which immediately led to some speculation that the murder may have been linked to his missionary activity. Shortly afterwards, a special government task force, consisting of representatives of a number of state security services was dispatched to the region,⁵⁵ and in early April 2004 dozens of detentions were reported in connection with the murder and other crimes in and around Isfara.

With those reports came rumours that the detainees belonged to a previously unknown group, Bay'at ("The Oath"). It is said to have been behind Bessarab's murder, as well as cases of arson targeting the homes and businesses of sellers of alcoholic beverages as well as local mosques. Precise information has been difficult to come by, and law enforcement officials have given conflicting reports on Bay'at's nature. While some have dismissed the group as purely criminal with no religious or ideological motives,⁵⁶ others have told ICG that it is a militant Islamist movement with possible connections to other radical groups in the region, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁵⁷

Apparently, a number of alleged members were once members of the IRPT. One, 45-year-old Barot Azimov, was reportedly active in the IRPT in Sughd province prior to the war, but later left the party. He had been arrested before, for illegal possession of an automatic rifle. He now faces charges of belonging to an illegal armed group. Another, 27-year-old Saidullo Madiyrov, also a former IRPT member from Isfara, is believed to have been one of two gunmen involved in Bessarab's murder.⁵⁸ Eight active local IRPT members were likewise detained and interrogated, in some cases for more than a day.⁵⁹ Most were subsequently released, although one, Umedjon Mahkamov, the driver for the party's local branch, remains in custody; he has apparently yet to be charged with any crime.⁶⁰ Some are reportedly still being called in for repeated interrogation, a practice which IRPT leader Nuri has condemned:

We are not opposed to investigation. Those who commit crimes should certainly be arrested and punished according to the law. But this is simply terrorisation of our supporters.⁶¹

The local IRPT leadership claims to know nothing about the group:

⁴⁸ "President Rakhmonov calls for fight against religious extremism", Asia-Plus News Service, at <http://news.somoni.com/bycat.php?viewCat=2&id=452>.

⁴⁹ According to local IRPT leaders interviewed by ICG in April 2004, 33 mosques were closed. While acknowledging that some might have been unregistered, they said all had applied for registration but may not have received an official response in the 30-day period within which the authorities are required to act on applications.

⁵⁰ Emom Ghoibov, "Isfara: khudsarii mulloho – zurovarî ba zanon", *Tojikiston* 14 November 2002.

⁵¹ ICG interview, Chorkuh, 24 April 2004.

⁵² Asia-Plus news agency, Dushanbe, 16 Jan 2004, via BBC Monitoring.

⁵³ Erlan Satybekov, "Fanatiki", *Vechernii Bishkek* 5 April 2004.

⁵⁴ Wendy Ryan, "Tajikistan pastor's martyrdom encourages more converts and workers", *Biblical Recorder*, 29 January 2004, at http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2004/1_29_2004/ne290401tajikistan.shtml.

⁵⁵ ICG interview with Colonel Mullohî Ruziyev, chief of police of Khujand, 23 April 2004.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ ICG interview with a representative of the Prosecutor General's Office of Sughd province, Khujand, 26 April 2004.

⁵⁸ ICG interview, Isfara, 24 April 2004.

⁵⁹ ICG interview with Abdusattor Boboyev, chairperson of Isfara branch of IRPT, Chorkuh, 24 April 2004.

⁶⁰ ICG interview with Muhammadali Abdumavlonov, deputy chairperson of Isfara branch of IRPT, Chorkuh, 24 April 2004.

⁶¹ ICG interview with Said Abdullo Nuri, chairperson of IRPT, Dushanbe, 7 April 2004.

All of this appears to have a political character. We don't know anything about Bay'at. We had never heard of it before. This is nothing other than slander without basis. It is all intended to undermine the authority of our party in this region before the elections.⁶²

Given the scarcity of concrete information, it is difficult to state with any certainty whether Bay'at is a militant Islamist group and what links it may have with other such groups in the region. Isfara has a history of criminal activity, and arms are reportedly kept by a large part of the population.

The Fergana Valley, of which Isfara is a part, has seen the rise of small criminal groups with a religious bent before; an example is the vigilante group *Adolat* ("Justice"), active in Namangan, in Uzbekistan's section of the valley, in the early 1990s. After it was suppressed, many members eventually resurfaced in the IMU.⁶³

The nature of the crimes attributed to Bay'at likewise seem to point towards it being such a criminal group with Islamist leanings. That mosques appear to have been targeted might seem surprising, but may indicate growing dissatisfaction with local religious leaders, a problem which a senior cleric in Khujand acknowledged to ICG.

Most of the people in the mosques nowadays, perhaps even 95 per cent, have a very weak knowledge of Islam. They think that being a mullah only means being there at circumcisions, at weddings, and at funerals. And when young people go to the mosque to hear the *khutba*,⁶⁴ they only hear the same things repeated over and over again. There's nothing there that relates to their lives. Of

course they're going to start looking for religious guidance elsewhere.⁶⁵

Senior IRPT leaders in Chorkuh expressed similar views, suggesting the crackdown on religious authorities in the area may have backfired, paving the way for the rise of more extremist groups.⁶⁶ Other commentators have suggested that Bay'at's alleged targeting of mosques stems from a sense that the local clergy have been co-opted by the government and no longer represent the interests of their communities.⁶⁷

C. HIZB UT-TAHRIR

Pressure on legal opposition groups may likewise increase support for such well-known illegal organisations as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which has been active in Central Asia in recent years. It is a radical Islamist group which insists it rejects the use of violence as a method of political struggle, but its aims are far-reaching, including replacing existing leaders of Muslim states and establishing a Caliphate throughout the Muslim world. It has mainly been active in the Fergana Valley. In Tajikistan it has found a constituency mostly among ethnic Uzbeks in the north.⁶⁸

There is evidence, however, that Hizb ut-Tahrir's reach might be extending beyond its traditional territory. In 2002, a six-member cell, all reportedly ethnic Uzbek, was uncovered in Vose, twenty kilometres north of Kulob.⁶⁹ In September 2003, two suspected Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters, a Tajik man and a woman, reportedly an Uzbek citizen, were arrested in Yovon, 30 kilometres south of Dushanbe.⁷⁰ The movement's core constituency, however, still seemed predominately Uzbek, and the literature seized in arrests was mostly the usual denunciations of the "infidel" regime of Uzbek president Karimov.

⁶² ICG interview with Haydar Bobohido, senior member of IRPT, Chorkuh, 24 April 2004.

⁶³ The IMU's military leader, Jumaboy Namangani, reportedly killed in Afghanistan during the U.S. campaign in 2001, formerly was an *Adolat* member. See ICG Asia Briefing, *Central Asian Perspectives on September 11 and the Afghan Crisis*, 28 September 2001; ICG Asia Report N°21, *Uzbekistan at Ten*, 21 August 2001; and ICG Asia Report N°14, *Islamic Mobilisation and Regional Security*, 1 March 2001.

⁶⁴ The sermon delivered during the congregational Friday noon prayer.

⁶⁵ ICG interview, Khujand, 23 April 2004.

⁶⁶ ICG interview with IRPT leaders, Chorkuh, 24 April 2004.

⁶⁷ Zafar Abdullaev, "Tajikistan: Concern at a new Islamic group", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *Central Asia*, N°280, 28 April 2004.

⁶⁸ For more information on the history and ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir, as well as its activities in Central Asia, see ICG Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003.

⁶⁹ Turko Dikaev, "'Khizb-ut-Tahrir': tadjihiki vytesniaiut uzbekov?", *Tribune-Uz* 25 March 2004.

⁷⁰ *RFE/RL Newslines*, 10 September 2003.

This may have fostered complacency in Tajikistan, both in and outside the government. A senior IRPT member interviewed in January 2004 was dismissive of a Hizb ut-Tahrir challenge, calling it "an Uzbek movement".⁷¹ However, in late February and early March 2004, 35 Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters -- almost all ethnic Tajiks -- were reportedly arrested in Kulob, a city with an overwhelmingly Tajik population. In keeping with Hizb ut-Tahrir's practice, these individuals were organised into cells (five members each), apparently with no knowledge of each other's existence. The seized literature, however, was different; rather than denouncing Karimov, it was said to focus mainly on problems plaguing Tajikistan's citizens, including chronic gas, electricity and water shortages, the plight of migrant workers in Russia, and the government's seeming indifference to the suffering of its citizens.

As with Hizb ut-Tahrir cells elsewhere in the region, those arrested in Kulob were mostly in their early twenties and from middle-class families. Some were small business owners. Reportedly, one was in the Russian army and two were relatives of the deputy mayor, Huronbi Vosiyeva.⁷² Some of those arrested were students of the mathematics department of Kulob State University.

It is not surprising that Kulob might be becoming a new front in Hizb ut-Tahrir's recruiting campaign. It faces extreme economic hardship, with few opportunities for young people and declining health and educational standards:⁷³

There is simply nothing for young people to do after school. In a few cases, their parents will tell them to study, to read, but that's rare. And there's nothing for them to read, anyway. There's not a single bookstore in the entire city. In Soviet times, we had a student club, we had cinemas. There's no working cinema in Kulob now. In my youth, we

would stand in line for hours to buy tickets to the theatre. Today we have to force our students to go.⁷⁴

Such boredom, combined with a chronic work shortage, could prove dangerous. With few alternatives, more young people in Kulob may turn to groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or be drawn into crime, particularly drugs smuggling. This is not the first time Kulob has faced such dangers.

The fact is that the criminal element has always enjoyed a certain prestige among the youth of Kulob. This was true in Soviet times as well -- young people used to tattoo their hands the way those who spent time in prison did and would incorporate a lot of Russian prison slang into their speech. This was always recognised as a potential danger -- in fact, the local Communist Party had a special project for providing employment for young Kulobi men, to keep them from turning to crime. I know this because I used to work there. Now there's nothing like that. And this could become a very serious problem.⁷⁵

Apparently in an effort to raise its standing locally, the Tajik government in 2002 declared that 2005 would mark the 2,700th anniversary of the city.⁷⁶ Massive construction is underway in the city centre, with apartment buildings being renovated and teahouses and supermarkets being built. Promises have been made to address the chronic shortage of utilities. As the newly-appointed mayor, Abdujabbor Zardiyev, told ICG, construction projects alone are expected to provide as many as 2,000 new jobs over the next year.⁷⁷

Yet, it remains an open question how much mileage the state will gain from the celebrations. Construction jobs are temporary, and many improvements seem little more than cosmetic. Many

⁷¹ ICG interview, Dushanbe, January 2004.

⁷² Turko Dikaev, "Tajikistan: Radical Group Uncovered in South", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *Central Asia*, N°271, 17 March 2004. Vosiyeva was fired shortly after the arrests. The official reason was mismanagement but the deciding factors are widely believed to be that two relatives had been caught up in the sweep and one of her houses was apparently used as a meeting place, unbeknownst to her.

⁷³ Turko Dikaev, "Kuliab: zob rastet, kak bob", *Asia-Plus*, 11 March 2004.

⁷⁴ ICG interview with university professor, Kulob, 20 April 2004.

⁷⁵ ICG interview with freelance journalist, Dushanbe, 12 February 2004.

⁷⁶ Extravagant celebrations of past greatness have become the norm in Tajikistan, beginning with the 2,500th anniversary of Khujand (1986), and continuing in post-Soviet days with the 1,100th anniversary of the Samanid dynasty (1999), the 2,500th anniversary of Istaravshan, formerly Uroteppa (2002), the 80th anniversary of Dushanbe (2004), and so on.

⁷⁷ ICG interview with Abdujabbor Zardiyev, mayor of Kulob, 20 April 2004.

Kulobis, though proud of the attention their city is receiving, are pessimistic about the implications of the celebrations for its future:

They'll build a supermarket that nobody will ever use. They'll build a teahouse that will be empty within a year. Kulob already has teahouses, and nobody goes to them anyway. Why will these be different? Wouldn't it be better for them to build a factory or two, so that people will have jobs? Or renovate some schools? This would win them the love of the people of Kulob.⁷⁸

Economic hardship is hardly limited to Kulob. A chronic shortage of work and extremely low wages for the few jobs available prompt hundreds of thousands of Tajiks to leave each year in search of employment, particularly in Russia. In some respects, this has been beneficial, with remittances from abroad an important income for people back home.⁷⁹ However, Russia has periodically raised the possibility of limiting Tajik migrants, which would have devastating social and economic consequences.

IV. THE GOVERNMENT, SECULAR OPPOSITION AND ELECTIONS

Few seem optimistic that the upcoming elections will provide serious change. The 2000 parliamentary elections, which resulted in sweeping victories for Rakhmonov's People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), were widely condemned by international observers as neither free nor fair.⁸⁰ There is little expectation that next year's will differ greatly. In fact, there appears to be a consensus among many observers that the results are a foregone conclusion, with the PDPT winning and

allocating a few seats to the opposition, regardless of what the actual votes might be.

I think this election won't be very different from the past one. Everything is already under control. The parties are still not strong in any of the regions -- I can't say that in Sughd there are any parties other than the PDPT which have any influence at all. And none of the parties has a clear vision about the problems of the country. Of course they'll all raise a hue and cry before the elections, but ... basically, everybody wants to hold on to the positions that they have, and I think they'll succeed.⁸¹

The PDPT dominates parliament and occupies most seats in local governments as well. There have been reports of government employees being forced to join the party to maintain their careers.

There is no difference between the PDPT and the old CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. If you want any kind of position, you absolutely have to join the president's party. Regional governors, mayors, ministers -- anybody who wants to have a career has to join the PDPT.⁸²

In April 2003, the parliament, with OSCE backing, put together an informal working group of its members and party leaders to suggest changes to the electoral law.⁸³ Most importantly, these included requiring independent monitors at polling stations, stricter penalties for interference in the electoral process by local officials and an increase in candidates elected by party list.⁸⁴ On this basis, the OSCE drafted a new law, which was to be submitted to the president and parliament, following revisions, in late 2003. As the time drew near, the PDPT announced opposition to certain articles and withdrew support.⁸⁵

In late 2003 two proposals for electoral reform were submitted to the parliament. One, supported jointly

⁷⁸ ICG interview, March 2004.

⁷⁹ See ICG Report, *Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development*, op. cit.

⁸⁰ According to official tallies, the party-list vote resulted in 65 per cent for the PDPT, 20 per cent for the CPT, and 7 per cent for the IRPT, giving them fifteen, five, and two seats, respectively. In single-mandate constituencies, the PDPT won an additional 21 seats, and the CPT, an additional eight. See "The Republic of Tajikistan: Elections to the Parliament, 27 February 2000. Final Report", OSCE Report, 17 May 2000. The OSCE report detailed violations, including widespread proxy voting, group voting, obstruction of independent observers, interference with local administrators, and tampering with results to benefit the PDPT.

⁸¹ ICG interview, Khujand, 23 April 2004.

⁸² ICG interview with Mahmadruzi Iskandarov, Tojikobod, March 2004.

⁸³ ICG interview with Yves Bargain, OSCE Ambassador to Tajikistan, 27 April 2004.

⁸⁴ Nigora Bukhorizoda, "Tadzhikistan: zakon o vyborakh", Deutsche Welle, 22 December 2003.

⁸⁵ ICG interview with Tuyghun Karimov, secretary of the central committee of the CPT, 13 March 2004.

by the Communists (CPT) and the IRPT, includes most of the recommendations proposed by the OSCE and the working group. The second, supported by the PDPT, includes a curious provision that every candidate be required to pay a "registration fee" of roughly U.S.\$3,500, to be returned only if the candidate breaks the five per cent barrier needed to win a seat.⁸⁶ This would make it a candidacy prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of parties and give a clear advantage to the PDPT.

Both drafts are making their way through committee, and the future of election reform is unclear. With PDPT members some 70 per cent of parliamentarians, the prospects for their bill seem brighter but all eyes are on the president, whose endorsement of a bill is essentially a guarantee of passage. In a major speech in late April, he refrained from supporting either bill.

The constant delays surrounding adoption of a new law suggest little desire on the part of the leadership to improve the conduct of elections. A new law would at least be a start, although this would not be expected to translate automatically into significantly better behaviour by the authorities on voting day. But some element of genuine competition in the electoral process would be a significant step. On the initiative of Rahmatullo Zohirov, leader of the Social-Democratic Party (SDPT), three opposition parties (SDPT, IRPT, and CPT) have formed a coalition with the stated goal of agitating for free and transparent elections but there is little reason to think it will be able to exert the necessary influence.

International NGOs, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), are attempting to prepare parties and other political actors for a more active role in the electoral process but the OSCE in particular should be more assertive in its leading role on electoral reform and assess whether a monitoring mission is warranted.

A. THE OPPOSITION

Many political parties seem to have come to a *modus vivendi* with the government, accepting the PDPT's near-total control of political life in exchange for a nominal role. The IRPT, potentially the most influential opposition party, walks a fine

line, still concerned to avoid accusations of extremism. Its leadership has been quite restrained in its criticism of the government. This has cost it some credibility with those who want greater pressure for change.

Alternatives are few. Most other parties are very small, with limited resources and support. But attitudes among some opposition political figures have been changing, particularly since the 2003 referendum. Opposition leaders are becoming slightly more reluctant to be co-opted; Social-Democratic Party leader Rahmatullo Zohirov left his post as presidential adviser in 2003; SDPT head Iskandarov openly turned down a government post and asserted that he will run an independent campaign.

But the system remains largely controlled by the ruling party, and challenges are not generally welcomed. A case in point is the *Taraqiyot* (Development) party. Its leader, Sulton Quvvatov, is a former interior ministry official from Kulob and head of the tax committee in the late 1990s.⁸⁷ Assessments of him in Kulob vary, and he is certainly no stranger to controversy. In 1999, he ran for a parliament seat and is widely believed to have received a majority. This was reportedly unacceptable to certain powerful figures, who enlisted the aid of a local warlord to replace the original ballots with falsified ones, giving victory to Quvvatov's opponent.⁸⁸

Taraqiyot first attempted to register in 2001; it was denied on a bureaucratic technicality. Subsequent efforts also were unsuccessful. After the most recent application for registration went unanswered for nearly four months, its supporters appear to have run out of patience, applying for permission to demonstrate in central Dushanbe; that application was rejected by the city government on 3 March 2004. In a statement released on 11 March, party leaders denounced the justice ministry and said four members would begin what proved a brief and unsuccessful hunger strike:

We never thought our hunger strike would result in our registration. The purpose was to attract attention, to end the information blockade about our party, and we were successful. The idea was to get our name out.

⁸⁶ Nigora Bukhorizoda, "Kak dostich' prozrachnosti I spravedlivosti", *Deutsche Welle*, 24 March 2004.

⁸⁷ "Sulton Kuvvatov: bokser, polkovnik, politik", *Asia-Plus*, 18 March 2004.

⁸⁸ ICG interviews in Kulob, February and April 2004.

Even negative attention is helpful -- this will only increase interest in our party.⁸⁹

On 26 March, Taraqqiyot's application for registration was again rejected, on the grounds that ten of 2,097 signatories to the petition had denied their membership in the party, and three had given an incorrect address. The party appealed to the Supreme Court and on 31 March, again applied to hold a demonstration of an estimated 5,000 supporters in Dushanbe, a request unlikely to be granted. It has promised further hunger strikes should these requests be denied. It also announced it was filing suit in civil court against the justice minister, seeking U.S.\$10,000 in compensation for the refusal to grant registration.⁹⁰

The question arises as to why the government should be so reluctant to register a party that, by its own admission, is quite small (though Fayziyev believes it represents a serious challenge to the status quo). The fact that Taraqqiyot's push for registration occurs on the eve of an election is doubtless a factor. Denial of registration is of a piece with increased pressure on opposition parties in general. Fayziyev argues:

There is at present a six-party system, which is undergoing a kind of coalescence. The CPT and the PDPT are merging -- both are remnants of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU), however much they might seek to deny it ... So the situation is really two against four. And now a third group has appeared, one that can appeal to the interests of those who are disillusioned with both sides....So naturally, our appearance has given the other parties reason to worry.⁹¹

There may be a regional factor behind Taraqqiyot's difficulties as well. According to Fayziyev, the bulk of party support comes from the south, and the government may be concerned about its potential to appeal to an impoverished and increasingly disgruntled populace. And although the party's support in the north is reportedly somewhat weaker, Fayziyev himself is from the city of Istaravshan. His high party position may be an effort to win support among

discontented northern elements where dissatisfaction with the regional balance of power is high.

The refusal to register Taraqqiyot is telling: pluralism is accepted as long as it does not threaten the status quo. As soon as a political group emerges that is seen (rightly or wrongly) as a real contender, it finds life increasingly difficult. The regime has set unwritten rules around opposition activity that have long been accepted by the opposition itself. The appearance of new forces and attitudes among the opposition could undermine the democratic façade that the government has developed over several years.

B. PRESS FREEDOM AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

In theory, the media should play an important role in the campaign. It is a strange mixture of free reporting and heavy censorship. Dushanbe newspapers are often very open and publish sometimes very critical pieces. However, the media most people receive -- state television and the occasional local newspaper -- is strictly controlled and reflects old Soviet practices.

Criticism is often treated as tantamount to incitement to civil war. In February 2004, *Asia-Plus* printed an interview with Khurinisso Ghafforzoda, the head of a non-governmental organisation in Gharm, who expressed concerns about government policies in the region, citing pressure on former opposition combatants and interference in the work of local party organisations and NGOs. She also highlighted the desperate economic plight, particularly as it affected the lives of local women.⁹² Her comments drew an outraged response from local governments throughout Rasht, with some leaders accusing her of undermining the peace. "Democracy ... has its limits", commented *Payomi Tojikobod*, the government-controlled newspaper of the Tojikobod region, comparing the article to inflammatory ones that appeared in the early 1990s.⁹³

These appeals to respect the peace and avoid inflammatory journalism are an effective form of control and are behind much of the self-censorship that is also evident among journalists. But self-

⁸⁹ ICG interview with Rustam Fayziyev, deputy chairperson of Taraqqiyot, 6 April 2004.

⁹⁰ Press conference by leaders of Taraqqiyot, Dushanbe, 9 April 2004.

⁹¹ ICG interview with Rustam Fayziyev, deputy chairperson of Taraqqiyot, 6 April 2004.

⁹² Parvina Khamidova, "Kh. Ghafforzoda: 'Ne nado nagnetat' strasti vokrug M. Iskandarova!", *Asia-Plus* 29 February 2004.

⁹³ Quoted in Ol'ga Il'iasova and Parviz Iskhakov, "'Blesk' i 'nishcheta' Rashtskoi zhizni'" *Asia-Plus*, 8 April 2004.

editorship also reflects the realities of the political system. As one journalist laments:

The state-controlled media will only cover the PDPT. When another party out in the regions holds a seminar or a conference, they will receive absolutely no coverage in the state media. It's not that the state-run media have been ordered by anybody to do so. They just know who their masters are.⁹⁴

There has been a gradual emergence of independent media outlets in some areas in recent years: the news agency Asia-Plus has a newspaper of that name and a Dushanbe-based radio station. The northern city of Khujand has a relatively lively media outlets. In 2003, two outspoken Dushanbe newspapers, *Ruzi nav* (*New Day*) and *Nerui Sukhan* (*The Power of Speech*) appeared and began to write openly about sensitive issues, in particular corruption at high levels of government.

They have also encountered numerous obstacles, however. Sharqi Ozod, the state-run printing concern which prints most of Tajikistan's newspapers, has refused to print either *Nerui Sukhan* or *Ruzi nav* since November 2003.⁹⁵ A 2003 article in *Nerui Sukhan* by Muhiddin Idizoda alleging the possible complicity of Ministry of Internal Affairs officials in human trafficking resulted in slander charges and anonymous threats.⁹⁶ An article by *Ruzi nav* editor Rajab Mirzo which complained that Rakhmonov was inaccessible resulted in the prosecutor general levelling criminal charges of "damaging the honour of the president".⁹⁷

Many regional centres suffer from an effective information vacuum. In Kulob the unreliable electricity supply makes publishing even of the state-run paper, *Haqiqati Kulob*, difficult.⁹⁸ A similar problem plagues

state-run *Oinai Rasht* in Gharm.⁹⁹ Shortages of equipment and funding mean that even the larger government papers, such as *Jumhuriyat*, are published no more than three times a week. Readership is extremely limited. In such circumstances, the government needs to do little to suppress media freedom.

A journalist in Kulob said, "It's not that there's any suppression of the media in Kulob. There simply is no media in Kulob".¹⁰⁰ There are good professional journalists there but they find themselves reporting on foreign stations or the internet. There is no local independent television, radio or newspaper. The region's poverty makes a commercial venture unlikely but an international media project could make an impact. The OSCE field office in Kulob has been considering one to support a local independent radio station whose broadcasts would also northern Afghanistan.¹⁰¹

V. THE INTERNATIONAL ROLE

A. DEMOCRATISATION

Many international organisations work in Tajikistan, predominantly on humanitarian aid and development, but also on more controversial issues, including political change and human rights. The OSCE and the UNTOP¹⁰² operation slightly overlap in supporting political development, including democratisation, human rights, and political parties.

⁹⁴ ICG interview with journalist, Kulob, 20 April 2004.

⁹⁵ Zafar Abdullaev, "Vlasti Tadjikistana daviat na nezavisimye SMI", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 12 January 2004.

⁹⁶ Idizoda's case is also detailed in the 2003 report by CIMERA, "Dostup k informatsii v Tsentral'noi Azii: Monitoring i analiz narushenii prav zhurnalistov i SMI v Tadjikistane", October 2003. The report details 35 additional cases of violation of journalists' rights between April and September 2003, ranging from unjustified denial of access to public information to copyright violations, threats, and unjustified legal action.

⁹⁷ "My ne oppozitsiia!", *Asia-Plus*, 11 March 2004.

⁹⁸ ICG interview with journalists, Kulob, 20 April 2004.

⁹⁹ ICG interview with Komil Bekzod, editor-in-chief, *Oinai Rasht*, Gharm, 31 March 2004.

¹⁰⁰ ICG interview with journalist, Kulob, 20 April 2004.

¹⁰¹ ICG interview with Bozhedar Dmitrov, head of OSCE field office, Kulob, 24 February 2004. There have been international efforts to promote independent media in other cities. In Sughd province, the OSCE-sponsored establishment of two independent newspapers: the Russian-language *Varorud* and the Tajik-language *Sughd*. The former has grown into a fully-fledged news and analytical agency. Plans to sponsor an Uzbek-language newspaper, *Tong*, in Sughd have faltered due to lack of donor support. ICG interview with Henk Hulshof, head of OSCE field office, Khujand, 23 April 2004. In Khujand, the OSCE was instrumental in establishing the NGO "Fourth Power", which runs a resource centre for local journalists. Recently, however, the OSCE has reduced funding, and it is in danger of closing. ICG interview with Parvona Firuz, director, "Fourth Power", Khujand, 23 April 2004.

¹⁰² UNTOP is the United Nations Tajikistan Office of Peacebuilding.

There has been increasing dissatisfaction with the international role in promoting change -- a sense that many actors are unwilling or unable to capitalise on the gains already made:

A few years ago, one could see democracy growing in Tajikistan but the international community has developed what may be a too-positive picture of Rakhmonov that encourages him to believe he can do almost whatever he wants. Unless a more critical stance is adopted, progress that has already been made may be lost.¹⁰³

Frequently the international community is too willing to go along with the official line which portrays the president as the sole guarantor of stability. The government is adept at using this argument when international organisations push for faster change, arguing that the priority is stability, and human rights and democratisation must be postponed until that is assured.

The OSCE and the UN have been quite muted in their criticisms of the regime and have often directed their activities into less confrontational arenas. Though many privately acknowledge the government's spotty record on human rights and political and economic reform, there is little inclination to push for deep changes.

The OSCE in particular is the frequent target of criticism from local political and human rights activists. An activist in Kulob complained:

For some reason, the OSCE here doesn't seem very concerned about the problem of human rights at all...Here [in Kulob] human rights are violated at every turn. And they just close their eyes to what's going on here.¹⁰⁴

Similar criticisms have been voiced in other regions, and the OSCE does seem to have been relatively passive in the past year on electoral reform, human rights, and other issues such as registration of opposition parties. In fairness, it has a different perspective. OSCE ambassador Yves Bargain asserts:

Silent diplomacy is sometimes the useful way. Shouting about human rights can be helpful,

but sometimes one gets better results in other ways....We have an ongoing dialogue with the government on human rights, we are moving ahead with prison reform and on the death penalty - - we have gotten results. If we maintain good relations with the government, it's much easier for us to work....There is a climate of cooperation and non-confrontation, and it is working.¹⁰⁵

There have indeed been achievements. The government is sometimes willing to engage when human rights concerns are raised. Capital punishment, for example, has been a priority for the OSCE, which has successfully pushed for a moratorium on executions.¹⁰⁶

But in other areas there has been only limited progress. A leader of an international NGO commented:

Everybody is ignoring human rights and the rule of law....Are they all so weak? How can the OSCE, for example, talk about "security" if they don't promote democracy?...Nothing has been done on torture, nothing has been done on prison reform. We could have saved lives. We are losing time, and we are losing people.¹⁰⁷

Some embassies have been more active on these sensitive issues. U.S. Ambassador Richard Hoagland has been outspoken about electoral reform and has publicly commented on corruption. European ambassadors are rather less visible. UNTOP has traditionally engaged in "quiet diplomacy" but has recently taken up electoral reform via a delegation that examined a possible UN role in the electoral process.

In general, though, the international community gives the impression of complacency. Much more could be done, and there is need for real pressure on the government to improve the election process and introduce true pluralism into the political system.

¹⁰³ ICG interview, Dushanbe, February 2004.

¹⁰⁴ ICG interview with human rights activist, Kulob, 19 April 2004.

¹⁰⁵ ICG interview with Yves Bargain, OSCE Ambassador to Tajikistan, 27 April 2004.

¹⁰⁶ President Rakhmonov announced the moratorium in his address to parliament on 30 April 2004. In the three weeks leading up to the moratorium, however, at least four prisoners are known to have been executed, and diplomatic sources have told ICG that the number may have been higher.

¹⁰⁷ ICG interview, Dushanbe, March 2004.

B. GEOPOLITICS AND INTERNAL STABILITY

Bilateral relations with major powers also have an impact on the internal situation. The relationship with Russia in particular has potentially far-reaching consequences for internal stability.

Until 2001 Russia's influence was unchallenged. It retained a military division -- the 201st -- in country, and its guards controlled the southern and eastern borders. Since Tajikistan gained increased strategic importance following the US-led military operation in Afghanistan, its government has gained greater international exposure and begun to develop stronger relations with the U.S. and EU member states. It has also asserted itself in negotiations with Russia, about Moscow's military presence and on a wider range of bilateral issues. Russia has been attempting to reassert its regional influence and counter the increased U.S. presence. It has requested permission for a base for the 201st division. But negotiations have stalled and relations cooled, with Tajikistan frequently accusing Russia of failing to protect Tajik migrant workers, and Russian media responding with accusations regarding Tajikistan's role in narcotics-smuggling in the region.

Tajikistan has an important trump card in these negotiations: the space surveillance station at Norak is a key part of Russia's global military capabilities and cannot be easily rebuilt elsewhere. Dushanbe is demanding a price for use of the site that Russia is balking at.

Of more importance for internal stability is the status of Russian border guards. A 1993 bilateral agreement entrusted defence of the long border with Afghanistan and China to the Russian Border Forces (RBF). Tajik citizens are 71 per cent of the 11,700-guard force's contract soldiers and 99 per cent of its conscripts, but only 7 per cent of its officers.¹⁰⁸

Intensive negotiations began upon the expiry of the RBF's mandate on 25 May 2003. Rumours abounded until February 2004, when Russia's ambassador, Maksim Peshkov, announced that, at the request of Tajikistan, the force would be withdrawn no later than the last quarter of 2005.

Diplomatic sources claim that the government's chief motivation was sovereignty; the fact that Russian

flags are flying along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan rankles. Article 9 of the agreement calls for the gradual transfer of the border to Tajik control. Apparently some in the government feel Russia has not lived up to the deal. There is also, apparently, some concern over the influence the Russian military might wield in Tajikistan's domestic politics.¹⁰⁹

The Tajik request is understandable, but it is far from clear that Tajik guards are ready to take over the difficult job at the Afghan border. As noted, many Tajiks already serve in the Russian force and have considerable experience in dealing with cross-border incursions. But the Tajiks have neither the financial nor the technological resources of the Russians. The simple fact that a Tajik border guard under Russian command receives ten times what he is likely to receive once the border reverts to Tajik control raises fears that corruption there will increase and facilitate narcotics-trafficking. Perhaps as many as 50,000 people in border areas are in some way dependent on Russian border guards for a living, particularly in the large eastern province of Badakhshon.¹¹⁰ Once that source of income is stopped, it will be tempting to turn to drug-smuggling.

Not only is this a clear danger for Central Asia, Russia and Europe, where the growing harvest of Afghan heroin is causing serious social problems, it also has a potential impact on internal stability. The removal of Russian border guards will likely lead to a struggle over the cross-border drugs trade; if agreement is not reached among leading criminals on a new division of a potentially greater trade, the struggle for control could become violent. A diplomat familiar with northern Afghanistan said, "Afghan drug-lords are worried: they don't know who they're going to have to deal with".¹¹¹

Indeed, there has been speculation in some quarters that the push to replace Russian border forces with Tajikistan's might be coming from Tajik officials seeking to assert their control over the drugs trade. Western officials interviewed by ICG, however, have been quick to point out that there is no credible evidence or intelligence to back up such suspicions.¹¹²

Some conspiracy theorists have accused the U.S. of playing a short-sighted game of geopolitics over the

¹⁰⁸ Turko Dikaev, "Okhraniiaia tadjhiksko-afganskuiu granitsu", *Tribune-Uz*, 6 March 2004.

¹⁰⁹ ICG interview, April 2004.

¹¹⁰ ICG interview, April 2004.

¹¹¹ ICG interview, Dushanbe, April 2004.

¹¹² ICG interview, Dushanbe, April 2004.

border forces. The U.S. has given increased equipment and training to Tajik border forces. NATO has also promised to help with establishment of a training school for border guards. But U.S. officials deny they have encouraged the Russian withdrawal; indeed, they suggest they were as surprised as anyone and, expecting a new surge in trafficking, are worried by the change in control.¹¹³

Tajikistan was always going to want to control its own borders, but a gradual process could have been agreed with Russia that would have permitted greater time for its forces to obtain training and financial assistance. Instead of the perception that a geopolitical game is being played, Russia and the U.S. could have acted jointly to provide that help to Tajik border guards, perhaps over five years, with Russia gradually ceding control section by section. But the rush to assert sovereignty has made it difficult to provide timely support.

Diplomats indicate that the Tajik government had earlier appealed to the EU and the OSCE for assistance in establishing a border guard academy, but without result. "This whole issue was dismissed by the West", a source told ICG, "because the Russians seemed to be taking care of the problem".¹¹⁴ The international community has belatedly taken somewhat greater interest. Asked by the government for assistance in March 2004, the U.S. and the EU have assembled a joint assessment team, which is to visit within the next two months. "Clearly, Tajikistan does not feel that it needs to be a Russian protectorate any more", said a diplomat. "But this needs to be handled very carefully. There needs to be close four-way coordination on this matter, between Russia, Tajikistan, the US, and the EU".¹¹⁵

Changes along Tajikistan's borders also raise concern in China. Russian forces recently withdrew from that portion of the border and turned control over to Dushanbe. China is experiencing an increasing flow of drugs into its Xinjiang region from Afghanistan, via Tajikistan and Pakistan. A new road will open in 2004 connecting eastern Tajikistan and China, and there are apparently concerns it will become a route for drugs-traffickers trying to supply a relatively new market in western China.

There seems little chance that Russia and Tajikistan will agree on extending the mandate of the border guards. Diplomats anticipate they will be entirely withdrawn by September 2005, although it seems a small contingent of advisers and trainers would remain, and some material assistance might also still be forthcoming from Moscow.¹¹⁶ The U.S., EU, and China should attempt to persuade the government to extend the handover period and offer significant support for development of a professional Tajik force. In the meantime, development organisations should prioritise income alternatives for local populations, which will suffer economically from the Russian withdrawal.

VI. CONCLUSION

The remnants of warlordism, the continuing struggle with the IRPT, the appearance of radical Islamist groups, and the tension expected in the lead up to parliamentary elections add up to an important test for Tajikistan's stability over the next year. It appears virtually inevitable that the withdrawal of Russian border guards will mean even greater flows of narcotics across the border and possibly internal disputes.

President Rakhmonov's efforts to produce peace and stability must be acknowledged. However, seven years have passed since the accords ending the civil war were signed, and there are indications his image as peacemaker is being eroded by poverty, corruption and the slow pace of reform. Some argue he is too isolated:

Rakhmonov doesn't seem to know what's going on in Tajikistan....The Nobel Peace Prize nomination,¹¹⁷ all these holidays -- he has no idea about reality. The government papers print that all is well, the TV programs all praise him.... I think this is probably from the people around him -- they'll do anything not to spoil his mood.¹¹⁸

It is true Rakhmonov seldom travels around the country but he probably has enough sources to gain

¹¹³ ICG interviews, April 2004.

¹¹⁴ ICG interview, Dushanbe, April 2004.

¹¹⁵ ICG interview, Dushanbe, April 2004.

¹¹⁶ ICG interviews, Dushanbe, April 2004.

¹¹⁷ This refers to an effort in 2001 to have President Rakhmonov nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

¹¹⁸ ICG interview with independent journalist, Dushanbe, March 2004.

a reasonable picture of what is happening. Nevertheless, the impression that he is overprotected by his advisers is widespread, and the lack of alternative information reaching his office may well be a factor in the surprise he seems to have felt at the reaction to some of the decisions he made in early 2004.

There are signs that fewer people are willing to accept the civil war as an explanation for all problems. "How long can we go on blaming the civil war?", asks an opposition party member. "Everybody says that all our problems came about because of 'democracy,' that everything was fine in Soviet times. How can they say this when there is clearly no democracy here?"¹¹⁹

The recent violence in Uzbekistan may be a further cause for concern. While it seems unlikely that there will be any direct "spill-over" effect from the violence, any serious disruptions within that country could have devastating consequences for Tajikistan's fragile economy.

For most people, life in Tajikistan is a constant struggle for survival in difficult economic circumstances. Few beyond a small Dushanbe elite are involved in politics. Yet for ordinary citizens the contrasts are becoming stark between their poverty and the million-dollar mansions being built around the capital. Widespread corruption is blocking economic growth and threatens to undermine international attempts to provide greater assistance. The leadership needs to reappraise its policies and attempt to ensure that all elements in society are included in the political process, including a much more concerted attempt to promote competent, younger officials, and an effort to breathe life into moribund political institutions.

The international community meanwhile needs to take a harder look at what is really going on and be more willing to confront the government over sensitive issues. Quiet diplomacy has merits but ignoring the problems of Tajikistan's political development threatens to undermine the very stability that the international community is dedicated to protecting.

Dushanbe/Brussels, 19 May 2004

¹¹⁹ ICG interview, April 2004.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF TAJIKISTAN



Map No. 3765 Rev. 10 UNITED NATIONS
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. ICG also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a 12-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.icg.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates seventeen field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Dushanbe, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kabul, Nairobi, Osh, Pretoria, Pristina, Quito, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tbilisi) with analysts working in over 40 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents. In Africa, those countries include Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda,

Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia; in the Middle East, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in Latin America, Colombia and the Andean region.

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May 2004

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