NO LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL: THE ENTRENCHMENT OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN TAJIKISTAN

Igor A. Kotler

The current President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, has ruled with an iron grip since his government emerged victorious following a brutal civil war. Under his leadership, a ruthless authoritarian regime has been established, systematically crushing opposition forces and silencing dissent.

The roots of this repression trace back to 1990. On February 11-12 of that year, the streets of Dushanbe were flooded with thousands of demonstrators demanding improved living conditions and equitable housing distribution from the authorities. In response, the KGB's elite Alfa division resorted to extreme violence, indiscriminately opening fire on unarmed protesters and killing 25 people in cold blood. Outraged citizens escalated their demands, calling for the resignation of the communist leadership. The regime retaliated with overwhelming force, deploying 5,000 troops to brutally suppress the unrest. To this day, neither the Soviet nor post-Soviet Tajik authorities have conducted an investigation into these atrocities. The international community, viewing the events as an internal Soviet affair, remained indifferent, allowing the repression to continue unchecked. Ultimately, the protests marked the beginning of a devastating civil war.

Tajikistan's civil war dragged on for more than five years, leaving a trail of destruction and human suffering. The conflict resulted in staggering casualties, with estimates ranging between 35,000 and 157,000 deaths. Over 37,500 homes were obliterated, and mass displacement followed—600,000 people fled to Afghanistan, while 195,000 sought refuge in

other post-Soviet states. Within Tajikistan, more than 1.5 million people were internally displaced, turning this remote corner of the former Soviet Union into a humanitarian disaster zone. In September 1991, Tajikistan declared independence, and soon after, presidential elections were held. Rahmon Nabiyev, the former general secretary of the Communist Party, was declared the winner in a fraudulent process so blatant that Moscow congratulated him even before polling stations had closed. Opposition forces protested, but once again, the international community remained silent—a pattern that would repeat itself in the years to come.

Since that time, the Tajik government imposes severe restrictions on freedom of expression. The country's only newspaper publishing house is state-controlled and denies access to media critical of the regime. All news outlets are heavily monitored, subjected to pre-publication censorship, and burdened with restrictive licensing requirements. Electronic media is either directly owned by the state or dominated through government-controlled regulatory mechanisms. Journalists, editors, and bloggers who dare to criticize Rahmon or his policies face harassment, intimidation, or worse. Independent journalism has been all but annihilated, as the regime has mastered the art of suppressing free speech through financial and legal warfare. Bogus lawsuits, such as the one that bankrupted the weekly *Paykon* over a corruption exposé, have crushed independent publications. In this repressive climate, self-censorship has become a necessity for survival, as the mere act of reporting the truth invites severe retaliation from the government.

A sequential examination of pivotal events in Tajikistan's past would offer valuable insight into the nation's deeply rooted system of political oppression. From the brutal crackdown on demonstrations in Dushanbe in 1990, where security forces fired upon protesters, to the rigged presidential elections of 1991 that solidified the dominance of Soviet-era elites, the

pattern of autocratic rule has remained unbroken. The catastrophic civil war (1992–1997) further entrenched a coercive state apparatus, enabling Emomali Rahmon to tighten his grip on power under the pretext of ensuring national stability.

http://news.ferganews.com/photos/2011/01/izbitglavreb.jpg

In February 2010, Khikmatullo Sayfullozoda, chief editor of *Najot* newspaper, which allowed some criticism of the government, was brutally beaten up not far away from the entrance to his apartment building.[1]

According to the 2014 report published by International Partnership cited lack of freedom of speech one of the major concerns in Tajikistan. From 2013 to 2014, 45 lawsuits were filed against journalists in Tajikistan. One of the journalists faced criminal charges. One of the most publicized cases is case against Asia Plus independent publication and its editor-in-chief Olga Tutubalina, who called the court's decision a "blow to the freedom of speech" and plaintiffs'

[1] Таджикистан: В Душанбе зверски избит главный редактор газеты «Нажот» (Chief Editor of "Najot" newspaper brutally beaten up in Dushanbe, Tajikistan), Fergana News, February 2011, http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=16344&mode=snews

claims that they had suffered emotional distress "absolutely bogus."[2] The report also states that journalists in Tajikistan constantly receive threats while law enforcement is unwilling to investigate their complaints.

There were also reported numerous instances of blocking internet resources. For example, for the reporting period from 2013 to 2014, YouTube has been blocked four times. In June 2014, Tajik authorities also blocked Gmail.[3]

Human rights defenders also became targets of the regime. In Tajikistan, no person that harbors opinion inconsistent with that of the policies of the regime or engages in activities that the Tajik authorities deem as a threat is safe.

In June 2014, special services of Tajikistan arrested Aleksandr Sadikov, University of Toronto researcher, who studying conflicts in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province of Tajikistan. Aleksandr Sadikov, who visited Khorog, the center of the autonomous province, disappeared for five days. He was arrested during his meeting with Alim Sherzamonov, a representative of Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan. The State Committee on National Security stated the Aleksandr Sadikov was detained on "suspicion of cooperation with special services of one of the foreign states."[4]

In October 2014, Tajik authorities blocked access to mobile messaging in capital city Dushanbe in anticipation of an opposition meeting. [5] In addition, the authorities introduced

[2] Тутубалина считает решение суда ударом по свободе слова (Tutubalina considers the court's decision as a blow to the freedom of speech), Asia-Plus, February 2014, http://news.tj/ru/node/184314
[3] Права человека в Таджикистане (Human Rights in Tajikistan), Radio Freedom, July 2014, http://rus.ozodi.org/content/article/25463512.html
[4] Арест таджикского ученого беспокоит правозащитников (Arrest of Tajik Scientist Raises Concern Among Human Rights Advocates), BBC, Russian Service, June 2014, http://195.188.87.10/russian/international/2014/06/140618_tajikistan_sadikov_freedom_house.shtml
[5] Жителей Душанбе лишили SMS (Residents of Dushanbe Deprived of SMS), Lenta.ru, October 2014, http://lenta.ru/news/2014/10/10/sms/

armed vehicles, into the city, conducted military training on suppressing mass rallies and blocked internet access to popular social networks.[6]

The situation with human rights is terrible in Tajikistan. The Human Rights Watch reported: Tajikistan's human rights record worsened further in 2017, as authorities deepened a severe, widespread crackdown on free expression and association, peaceful political opposition activity, the independent legal profession, and the independent exercise of religious faith. Well over 150 political activists, including a number of lawyers and journalists, remain unjustly jailed, and the relatives of dissidents who peacefully criticize the government from outside the country are subjected to violent retaliation orchestrated by authorities, including arbitrary detention, threats of rape, confiscation of passports and property, and vigilante justice at the hands of sometimes-violent mobs.

Torture remains a serious concern. Since 2016, the Coalition against Torture, a collection of Tajik rights groups, has reported at least 90 instances of torture or ill-treatment in detention. Although a law on domestic violence has been in place since 2013, legal protections for victims remain insufficient and impunity for perpetrators of domestic violence continues as the norm.

In December 2016, Tajik security officials harassed the relatives of several peaceful protestors, including Vaisiddin Odinaev, who were demonstrating in Prague during President Rahmon's official visit with Czech president Milos Zeman. A few days after the demonstrations in Prague, security service officers in Tajikistan forcibly took Odinaev's 75-year-old grandfather to the Shahrinav district police station and interrogated him for five hours.

In September 2017, Tajik security services detained and tortured Safar Kabirov, in an effort to deter his son, Poland-based opposition activist Muhamadjon Kabirov, from participating

[6] Восемьсот китайцев, джихад и пустая площадь. Больше в деревне никто не живет (Eight Hundred Chinese, Jihad and Empty Square. There is Nobody Living in the Village Any longer), Fergana News, October 2014, http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8276

in an annual human rights conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Officers wrapped Kabirov's hands in chains and forced him to call his son and beg him not to participate in an "anti-government protest." Muhamadjon ultimately participated in the human rights conference despite the pressure on his family. Kabirov's detention was one of several other simultaneous incidents whereby authorities detained and intimidated the parents and other relatives of activists to stop their peaceful activities, including by threatening further violence, confiscating property, and banning any travel outside the country.

"As a peaceful Tajik activist outside the country I have watched how my colleagues inside Tajikistan have been crushed by the government, thrown into jail for long prison terms. But even outside the country, I am unable to exercise my right to free expression and assembly because of authorities' threats to my loved ones in Tajikistan. Tajik authorities do not tolerate criticism of any kind. Due to my participation in a human rights conference in September 2017, authorities detained my father, tortured him while his hands were wrapped in chains, and threatened him with long-term imprisonment if I do not agree to stop my human rights activities. When will the countries lending support to this repression decide that enough is enough?" — Muhamadjon Kabirov, Tajik activist, September 12, 2017, Warsaw, Poland (during OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting).

In December 2016, authorities confiscated the passports of the mother, daughter, and several relatives of Shabnam Khudoydodova, an independent activist living in Warsaw. Since late 2016, every few months following Khudoydodova's participation in the 2016 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (OSCE/HDIM), a human rights conference, authorities have regularly threatened and harassed Khudoydodova's relatives in Kulob.

Their intimidation includes visiting their home to remind them they are under surveillance and threatening that if Khudoydodova's mother attempts to leave the country with Khudoydodova's 10-year-old daughter authorities will "shave her bald" and place her in a state orphanage. Following the intervention of local human rights defenders, authorities returned the passports only in November 2017, holding them for almost a year.

In July, security service officers in seven cities across Tajikistan arbitrarily detained and interrogated the relatives of at least ten peaceful activists who, earlier that month, had attended a conference in Dortmund, Germany commemorating the signing of the peace accords that formally ended Tajikistan's civil war. Authorities retaliated against the activists' relatives, publicly shaming them for their family members' activism.

One of the opposition activists was Jamshed Yorov, Germany-based lawyer and brother of jailed human rights lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov. Tajik authorities visited his family home in Tajikistan and informed Jamshed's wife, Dilbar Zuhurova, that she and her children would be imprisoned if they tried to leave the country. Officers also pressured Zuhurova to divorce Yorov, and threatened to rape Zuhurova's 15-year-old daughter.[7]

The parliamentary elections in Tajikistan on March 1, 2020 did not bring any change in the country: parties close to authoritarian president Emomali Rakhmon won all the seats in an election marred by irregularities and no space for genuine political pluralism. According to monitors from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the human rights agency of the Organization for Security & Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the "level of respect of fundamental freedoms has further deteriorated since the last elections and the choice between political alternatives is limited in the absence of independent media and a functioning

[7] Tajikistan: Events of 2017. Human Rights Watch, 2018. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/tajikistan

opposition." Since 2014, Tajikistan's human rights record has been deteriorating. Now the country is in a deep human rights crisis. The government continues a severe crackdown on free expression and association, peaceful political opposition activity, the legal profession, and exercise of religious faith.[8]

The regime does not allow any criticism, real and alleged. In December 2017, Tajik authorities detained respected independent journalist, Khayrullo Mirsaidov, and sentenced him in July 2018 to 12 years in prison on bogus charges of "embezzlement," "forgery," and "providing false testimony." There was an international outcry about Mirsaidov's case. In August 2018, the Sughd Regional Court upheld his conviction but released him, ordering him to pay a fine and do community service. In April 2020, the government threw in prison two prominent journalists., who criticized it. On April 16, 2020, the Dushanbe Shohmansur court, sentenced Daler Sharipov to one year in prison on charges of incitement of religious discord for printing copies of a dissertation.[9]

The human rights abuses continued into the era of the Covid-19: Tajikistan has not acknowledges the existence of Covid-19 cases in the country. Human Rights Reports: Tajik authorities have provided some information about how to prevent the spread of Covid-19 on government ministry websites, and have visited some schools, universities, and army bases to inform people about the disease. However, they have not imposed quarantine or encouraged social distancing in any meaningful way. The government did not cancel Nowruz, or New Year, festivities in late March, and schools, businesses, and most public spaces remain open.[10]

---

[8] Vladislav Lobanov. A New Human Rights Agenda for Tajikistan. Human Rights Watch, May 4, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/04/new-human-rights-agenda-tajikistan#

[9] Tajikistan: Journalist Held on Baseless Charges. Human Rights Watch, Update April 16, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/21/tajikistan-journalist-held-baseless-charges

[10] Central Asia: Respect Rights in Covid-19 Responses. Human Rights Reports, April 23, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/23/central-asia-respect-rights-covid-19-responses

It means that the regime is ready to sacrifice human lives in order to avoid any protest for its incapability to face and to struggle the pandemic.

Throughout 2020, the Rahmon regime increased restrictions on freedom of speech and the media in Tajikistan, using legislation to pressure individual journalists and bloggers and to obstruct the work of international media in the country. Even media outlets based outside the country's borders faced new challenges from the Tajik government.

In March, 2020 the Supreme Court blocked access to the Prague-based, Tajikistan-focused, independent news outlet akhbor.com. Accused of collaborating with extremist organizations, the portal was banned in the country. Later, in November, akhbor.com announced the cessation of its activities, citing danger to its journalists and obstruction by authorities.

Amendments to the administrative code introduced fines for "disseminating incorrect or inaccurate information" about the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these changes do not specify how to measure the inaccuracy of such information. Prior to the amendments, a website where civil activists kept an alternative count of coronavirus deaths in Tajikistan was blocked. In addition, the General Prosecutor's Office threatened liability for those "sowing panic."

The state committee on television and radio sent a letter to all independent stations insisting they broadcast programs that "promote national identity and patriotism."

The Foreign Ministry continued to obstruct reporters working for international media. In January, Jamie Fly, then-president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), stated that Tajik authorities had failed to fulfill their promises to accredit Tajikistan-based correspondents. In August, 2020 accreditation for RFE/RL's *Current Time* correspondent Anushervon Aripov was not renewed following his story about President Rahmon's hometown. Asia-Plus, a leading independent news agency, was forced to move from its office in December

after years of working and investing in the premises, a rented space in a state-owned building dedicated for newspapers and other media. In November, the building management notified the agency that it had to vacate the office in 30 days. After Asia-Plus left, the space was provided to Khovar, the official state information agency.[11]

There were a total of over 80 attacks of all kinds, physical and non-physical, including cyber-attacks and "attacks via judicial or economic means," on journalists in the country between 2017 to 2019, according to a report in April by the Justice for Journalists Foundation.[12]

Torture and other forms of inhumane treatment remained pervasive. Reports indicate that various security agencies, particularly the State Committee for National Security and the so-called Sixth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, routinely employed these methods to coerce "confessions" and implicate others. Alleged techniques included inserting needles under fingernails, administering electric shocks, physical assaults, sexual violence, sleep deprivation, suffocation with plastic bags, and forced drug injections. For example, On January 2, 2023 Abdukakhkhor Rozikov died while in police custody in the city of Kulob. His death was widely attributed to torture, with photographic and video evidence supporting these claims. In a rare instance of accountability, three former police officers were sentenced to 14 years in prison on July 25 for their role in his death.

Reports from detainees indicated ongoing mistreatment, including physical beatings, restricted access to food and water, and exposure to cold and damp conditions inside prison cells.

[11] Tajikistan. Freedom House, 2021. https://freedomhouse.org/country/tajikistan/nations-transit/2021
[12] Tajikistan: Events of 2020. Human Rights Watch, 2021. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/tajikistan#

Many inmates were also reportedly afflicted with tuberculosis but were denied proper medical care.[13]

Tajikistan's record on civil liberties is tarnished by grave abuses, particularly in relation to the suppression of political dissent and the entrenchment of autocratic rule. The administration, led by President Emomali Rahmon, has been accused of arbitrary or unlawful executions, including extrajudicial killings, along with the employment of torture and other inhumane treatment by security forces. These oppressive measures have cultivated an atmosphere of intimidation and subjugation, eroding essential human freedoms.

The political opposition in Tajikistan endures relentless suppression. Authorities have methodically dismantled opposition factions, including the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and Group 24, labeling them as extremist groups and incarcerating their members. This extensive crackdown has effectively eliminated structured political opposition, granting the ruling party unchecked dominance and obstructing democratic governance.

The Tajik authorities have repeatedly faced allegations of orchestrating the forced disappearance of political adversaries residing abroad, particularly in countries where they have sought refuge. Activists, dissidents, and members of outlawed opposition groups have been unlawfully seized in nations including Turkey, Russia, and Belarus. Many of these individuals are arbitrarily detained and deported to Tajikistan, where they endure torture, forced confessions, and lengthy prison sentences on fabricated political charges. The government has exploited international security agreements and clandestine operations to suppress dissent beyond its borders, frequently breaching international laws designed to safeguard refugees and asylum seekers. These cross-border oppressive measures have instilled widespread fear among the Tajik

[13] Tajikistan 2023. Amnesty International, 2024. https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/tajikistan/report-tajikistan/

opposition abroad, compelling many to live in hiding or seek protection from global human rights organizations. One of the latest example is the disappearance of Sukhrov Zafar. According to some reports, Zafar was unlawfully taken while in Turkey in March 2024, despite being officially recognized as an asylum seeker by UNHCR. Sources indicate that the Tajik State Committee on National Security is detaining him in Dushanbe, subjecting him to periodic torture, and depriving him of medical care. The Tajik authorities have neither acknowledged his detention nor disclosed his location.[14]

Autocracy is deeply embedded in Tajikistan's political framework. The ruling establishment enforces rigid constraints on freedoms of speech, assembly, and religious practice. Independent journalism and civil society organizations function under continuous intimidation, with reporters, attorneys, and activists subjected to harassment, arbitrary imprisonment, and coercion. The regime's sweeping influence over political and social spheres has resulted in pervasive self-censorship and a glaring absence of governmental accountability.

The plight of political prisoners serves as a stark reflection of Tajikistan's oppressive environment. High-profile individuals, such as Mahmadali Hayit, the former deputy leader of the IRPT, have been handed life sentences on politically motivated accusations. Evidence suggests that these detainees frequently endure mistreatment, are deprived of fair legal proceedings, and are confined under appalling conditions. The government's continued denial of access to political prisoners by human rights organizations further intensifies concerns over their welfare and the broader state of justice in the nation.

---

[14] Tajikistan: Forcibly Disappeared Opponent Allegedly Tortured. The Human Rights Watch, March 2, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/02/tajikistan-forcibly-disappeared-opponent-allegedly-tortured

In conclusion, the political climate in Tajikistan continues to decline, posing a serious risk to the country's stability. For the last decades, opposition factions were systematically dismantled, independent journalism was stifled, and civil society organizations were subjected to relentless state oversight. The transnational targeting of dissidents—including kidnappings and the forced repatriation of political adversaries—demonstrates the regime's unwavering stranglehold on power. Analyzing these developments over time reveals a consistent trend: Tajikistan's governance has transformed into an increasingly autocratic system, where repression is not an exception but a deeply entrenched mechanism aimed at eradicating opposition and preserving the ruling elite's control. The Tajik authorities' inability to enact democratic reforms to maintain political stability, combined with nationalist policies, an autocratic regime, widespread corruption, and economic hardship, has fostered a perilous environment for opposition figures, political activists, journalists, bloggers, and individuals belonging to ethnic, religious, and LGBTQ minorities.