



The Rising Risks of Misrule in Tajikistan

Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°86
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I. Overview

Tajikistan's 25 years as an independent state have been marred by poverty, endemic state corruption and the steady narrowing of political power to a single family. Its patriarch is President Emomali Rahmon, 64, who has ruled the country since 1992 through a carefully calibrated system of patronage and brutality. With Rahmon's current seven-year term set to end in 2020, many observers believe he is now planning to hand over power to a close family member, probably his eldest son, Rustam, 29. This transition plan is fraught with risk, however, and will play out in a country riven by internal frailties and external vulnerabilities. The outside world has few levers in this Central Asian state of 8.7 million people. But its pivotal position in Central Asia, where it borders on both Afghanistan and China, should prompt external actors, especially Russia, to engage as far as possible to avoid a new source of regional disorder.

Over the past two years, President Rahmon has cleared the political space, removing any group or individual, ally or adversary he considered a potential threat. This provides him with a powerful argument against any international or domestic political actor tempted to call for change. Other than the president and his family, there are no organised, functional political forces left. It is his regime or nothing, with even parts of his own traditional powerbase increasingly marginalised. The resentment this produces could lead to a destabilising and potentially violent internal backlash. The fallout likely would be felt throughout Central Asia.

The international community has few options. Central Asian neighbours, including Russia and China, should focus on securing the vulnerable Tajik-Afghan border and China in particular should take steps to help revive Dushanbe's failing economy. The European Union (EU), an important donor to Tajikistan, should push for an orderly transition even if devoid of democratic credibility. In taking these steps, all parties need to bear in mind the one overriding factor that constrains their influence: for now, Rahmon's own personal interests dominate the country's agenda.

II. Internal Uncertainties

A. Family Feuds

A key question for Tajikistan today is whether President Rahmon will forego power in 2020 and, if he does, whom he will choose as a successor. Rahmon, still relatively young at 64, is putting a transition plan in motion, if not for 2020 then later. Constitutional amendments passed in 2016, particularly one that lowers the president's minimum age, suggest Rahmon's son Rustam is the favourite.¹ Rahmon has been pushing Rustam into high-profile, powerful posts, such as that of mayor in the capital city of Dushanbe.² If Rustam joins the senate as its chairman after he turns 30 in December 2017, as analysts and media have speculated, he could become president should his father die or become incapacitated.³

This scenario is far from certain, however. Rustam faces internal competition and is hampered by his own lack of skill as a government administrator and manager of patronage networks.⁴ But he has consolidated informal power over the security services, which ultimately will be the decision-makers in the event of a contested succession.⁵ Moreover, although Western observers and members of the urban intelligentsia often describe Rustam as reckless, aggressive and lacking leadership qualities, the pool of potential successors is small.

That pool consists of family members. Media speculation focuses on internal rivalries, mentioning Rustam's sister Ozoda, 39, who runs the presidential administration and is reputed to be competent. She and her banker-businessman husband Jamollidin Nuraliyev at times are mentioned as a possible power couple, though Tajikistan's patriarchal society works against her. Conflicts involving members of the extended family and could also trigger instability in the context of a succession.⁶ Rustam has struggled with his uncle (the president's brother-in-law) Hasan Asadullozoda for control of revenues from the Tajik Aluminium Company (Talco), which provides up to 70 per cent of the Tajikistan's foreign currency earnings.⁷ Other family members feature in local conflicts over state resources. Without careful management, these internal family feuds could be destabilising, especially at a time of uncertainty over the presidency's future.

¹ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78, *Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats*, 11 January 2016.

² "Рустами Эмомали назначен мэром Душанбе" ["Rustam Emomali appointed as mayor of Dushanbe"], Radio Ozodi, 12 January 2017.

³ Kamila Ibragimova, "Tajikistan: Purge of ex-mayor's allies picks up steam", EurasiaNet.org, 15 February 2017. Crisis Group correspondence, Central Asia expert, September 2017.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local researcher and Western observer, Dushanbe and Khatlon, September 2016. Similar concerns are voiced by Western diplomats in the region. Crisis Group interviews, European diplomat, Bishkek, January 2017; U.S. diplomat, Astana, June 2016.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, local researcher, Dushanbe, September 2016. Foreign officials familiar with American-Tajik security cooperation also noted that Rustam has considerable influence over the security forces, often acting as if he were their boss when attending training and other exercises. Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, September 2016.

⁶ Ilkhom Nazarov, "Борьба за власть в Таджикистане. У Рустамы Эмомали появился конкурент?" ["The struggle for power in Tajikistan. Does Rustam Emomali have a new competitor?"], *Alternativnaya Politika*, 28 October 2016. See also "Tajikistan's anti-corruption drive sign of internal feud?", EurasiaNet, 22 May 2017.

⁷ "Last year's blackout reportedly costs TALCO at more than 8 million USD", Asia-Plus, 1 May 2017.

B. *Local Rivalries*

The president's regional power base is showing signs of disaffection. President Rahmon's winning faction during the civil war (1992-1997) was based in Kulob, part of the cotton-growing area of Khatlon, on the country's southern border with Afghanistan. Kulobis consequently dominate the most lucrative businesses and hold the most important positions in security structures, at the expense of those from other regions who feel they occupy subservient positions. That circle of power has narrowed, however, as money and resources have dwindled.⁸ The effect has been to sharpen fault lines among Kulobis, undermining the political unity that had allowed them to prevail. For example, Kulobis from other parts of Khatlon are losing out to Kulobis from Rahmon's hometown, Danghara. This is feeding anger among many previously loyal supporters, who may not need much persuasion to take a stronger stance against the Rahmon clan.

The trouble brewing in Rahmon's loyalist heartland is a bellwether for tensions in Tajikistan's politically peripheral regions. Any perception that President Rahmon's power is about to weaken could tempt areas suspicious of Dushanbe's central power – such as the eastern area of Rasht and the mountainous Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) – to take further steps toward autonomy. Rasht has long been known for its distrust of Dushanbe's authority. Former United Tajik Opposition (UTO) members there have used force to retaliate against efforts by Dushanbe to enforce its writ, leading to killings of Tajik security and military forces.⁹ In GBAO, too, infringements on local autonomy resulted in bloody flare-ups in 2012 and 2014.¹⁰

Clashes in both Rasht and GBAO have embarrassed Rahmon, demonstrating the limits of his power. His response to the unrest in both regions was to cut deals and co-opt leaders by granting access to resources and other forms of patronage.¹¹ Given Tajikistan's weak finances, this is far from sustainable. Moreover, Rahmon's successor may not have the skills required to navigate a fraught political environment.

C. *Economic Troubles*

Tajikistan's systemic economic problems are part of the reason government resources are shrinking. Many sectors are suffering: confidence is low in Tajikistan's currency; remittances from Russia decreased in 2016¹²; the real-estate market is crashing; and half of all bank loans are non-performing. The Tajik government this year issued high-yield bonds to raise revenue,¹³ which has allowed them to avoid working with international financial institution or donors who ask for reforms.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tajik analyst, Dushanbe, September 2016.

⁹ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, 12 February 2009; Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, 24 May 2011. The UTO fought against the government during the civil war that began in 1992, but signed a peace agreement in 1997.

¹⁰ Kirgizbek Kanunov, "Riots in Tajikistan's Gbao raises fears of broader destabilization", *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 4 June 2014.

¹¹ Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, op. cit., p. 10.

¹² Remittances from Russia fell to \$1.9 billion in 2016 compared to \$2.2 billion in 2015. "Central Asia's remittances: Take two", *EurasiaNet*, 22 March 2017.

¹³ Natasha Doff and Lyubov Pronina, "Junk bond fever hits a new high in Tajikistan", *Bloomberg*, 11 September 2017.

The government points to the Russian economic crisis as the primary cause of its woes, but fiscal mismanagement and predatory economic policies have also played a significant role over the past decade. Diplomats say the lack of accountability remains a major hurdle for international financial support.¹⁴ In 2016, the Tajik government declined an offer of up to \$200 million in the form of grants and loans from the World Bank, because of the pre-conditions attached, which involved reform of the banking sector, currently largely controlled by Rahmon family members and associates.¹⁵ Nor did the EU or International Monetary Fund (IMF) provide financial support to the Tajik budget in 2016.¹⁶ Tajikistan's successful foray into the bond market arguably has weakened the leverage of donors seeking to impose political conditionality on aid and loans.¹⁷

The public bears the brunt of these persistent economic difficulties. A third of Tajikistan's population is undernourished and malnutrition is the underlying cause of about one third of child deaths,¹⁸ a higher proportion than in any of the other former Soviet republics. But the economic crisis also affects the corruption and patronage networks behind Rahmon's rule. Citizens and private businesses increasingly are unable to pay bribes to law enforcement officers and government officials. These officials, in turn, have become increasingly aggressive as they struggle to pay debts incurred to finance the bribes they had to pay to obtain their jobs.¹⁹ In short, economic realities are placing an increasingly fragile power structure under strain, raising questions about its long-term viability.

D. *Migration*

Migration is the main outlet for Tajiks suffering from social, political and economic tensions. More than a million Tajiks live and work in Russia, which helps defuse a potential source of instability by absorbing working age men who might otherwise be under- or unemployed at home. But there is a flip-side as Moscow could force the migrants to return, which gives it important leverage over the Tajik president and serves as a considerable constraint on his dealings with Russia.

Moscow's priority is to have a compliant partner and an ongoing military presence in Tajikistan. A senior member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), an opposition party banned in October 2015, said, "Russia tolerates, not supports, Rahmon, because there are no other options really ... whether Russia will support his eldest son, Rustam, [in his succession bid] will depend on how Rustam behaves".²⁰ Although it seems unlikely at this stage, Moscow could threaten to expel

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Bishkek, January 2017. The banking sector in particular remains fragile. "Papa's purse: Faced with signs of fraud, some donors look the other way", *The Economist*, 18 June 2015.

¹⁵ The conditions included wholesale reforms of the banking sector, including changing top management at Tajikodirobank and Agroinvestbank.

¹⁶ "Tajikistan: Strong Growth with a Challenging Outlook", Country Economic Update, World Bank Group, spring 2017.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Brussels, September 2017.

¹⁸ "The Republic of Tajikistan", World Food Programme, 2016; Tajikistan, "Annual Report 2015", UNICEF.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tajik analyst, Dushanbe, September 2016.

²⁰ Crisis Group phone interview, Bishkek, August 2017.

Tajik migrants should bilateral relations deteriorate, presenting the current or incoming president with an enormous crisis.

Emigration from Tajikistan also concerns the EU as the number of Tajik asylum seekers is rising. In 2016, 3,230 Tajiks applied for asylum in EU countries, up from 1,160 in 2015 and 605 in 2014.²¹ An IRPT member living in Europe said, “if something happens in Tajikistan, Tajik refugees will come to Europe. It is cheaper and easier for Tajiks to get to Europe than for Syrians”.²² European officials express fears that Russia could use an influx of Central Asian migrants to heighten tensions over migration in Europe.²³

III. A Jihadist Threat?

A. Afghanistan

For years Tajikistan has confronted the risk of jihadist spillover from across its 1,400km border with Afghanistan. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province or the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), an affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has led both Russian and U.S. officials to express concern that the movement may reset its priorities northward and attempt to make inroads into Central Asia.²⁴ The presence of Central Asian militants within IS-K ranks, albeit as a minority, aggravates such fears.²⁵ So too does increasing instability in Afghanistan’s north east, close to the Tajik border.

The immediacy of the threat remains open to debate, however. Although the situation in northern Afghanistan is deteriorating, most incidents along the Tajik-Afghan border appear to be related to smuggling rather than incursions into Tajik territory or attempts to attack the Tajik state.²⁶ Though its emergence is worrisome, the IS-K is still dwarfed by the Taliban, which remains by far the largest armed opposition group and whose leaders express no territorial interest beyond Afghanistan’s borders. The Taliban arguably has been the main check on ISIS’s growth in Afghanistan, often moving quickly to crush IS-K factions.²⁷ Moreover, the core of

²¹ “Asylum and first-time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex annual aggregated data (rounded)”, Eurostat, consulted by Crisis Group August 2017.

²² Crisis Group phone interview, IRPT member in exile, July 2017.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, EU diplomats, Delhi, India, June 2016; Brussels, May 2017. See also: Jozef Lang, “Central Asia: the crisis of the migration model and its potential impact on the EU”, *Osrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW)*, 25 April 2017.

²⁴ Vladimir Dobrovolskiy, “Россия обеспокоена афганским крылом ИГ” [“Russia is worried about the Afghan wing of ISIS”], *RIA-Novosti*, 5 October 2016. In February 2017, the U.S. warned that IS-K had assembled a network that included former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) members. “These groups benefit from complementary capabilities and networks and require continuous pressure to prevent the emergence of a new, more virulent organization in which the new whole is more dangerous than the sum of the previous parts”. “Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander U.S. Forces – Afghanistan Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan”, 9 February 2017.

²⁵ Crisis Group correspondence, security official, March 2017.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, local analyst, Dushanbe, September 2016.

²⁷ “Afghan Taliban issues statement for the Central Asian countries”, *Khaama Press*, 18 July 2016. There recently have been reports of collaboration between Taliban and IS-K militants, including during one offensive near Sar-e Pul, but overall the two movements compete. Even during the

the IS-K remains in eastern provinces closer to Pakistan than Central Asia. Whether the small militias in the north that claim to be part of IS-K have direct operational ties to forces in the east is unclear. Nor is it clear, for now, that the Central Asian militants fighting alongside the Taliban, including in the north east, have Tajikistan in their sights.²⁸

Tajikistan's inherent weakness and porous borders make it vulnerable, however. Traffickers have been moving large volumes of drugs across the Afghan border for over two decades, providing revenue to security officers who, in turn, support Rahmon and his inner circle.²⁹ The governing elite's role in cross-border narcotics smuggling may help it manage the border informally for now, but in the longer-run such activities undermine efforts to secure it. So long as corrupt officials have an interest in keeping the border porous, there is a danger that militants – not just drugs – will spill over from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.

B. Radicalisation

Under the guise of combating jihadists, authorities in Dushanbe have quashed internal dissent and repressed Islamic practices.³⁰ The government restricts its citizens' ability to display piety and publicly adhere to Islamic norms. Police have forcibly shaved men's beards, and registered or even arrested women who wear hijabs.³¹ The government also forbids anyone under the age of eighteen from attending a mosque and prohibits anyone under 35 from making the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Tajiks resent these policies, which apply only to certain citizens. The economic or political elite faces few such restrictions. Young members of criminal gangs and the sons of government officials are seen wearing beards and the wives of government officials wear hijabs, sometimes because their husbands order them to.³² While the security services claim the bulk of militants travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of ISIS come from the opposition IRPT – thereby linking Islamism in Tajikistan to jihadism abroad – a prominent Tajik expert on radicalisation disputes that:

We have this stereotype that people who leave for Syria are usually from areas that were pro-opposition during the civil war, but it is not true. It is actually the

Sar-e Pul incident, UN investigators found no evidence of operational ties between the local IS-K faction and the core of the movement in eastern Afghanistan. See, for example, Josh Smith, "Joint Taliban Islamic State raid killed unarmed Afghan militia, civilians: UN", Reuters, 20 August 2017.

²⁸ See, for example, Obaid Ali's series "The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North", Afghan Analysts Network, January-September 2017.

²⁹ Filippo De Danieli, "Counter-narcotics Policies in Tajikistan and Their Impact on State Building", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2011), pp. 129-145; David Lewis, "High Times on the Silk Road: The Central Asian Paradox", *World Policy Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2010), pp. 39-49.

³⁰ Crisis Group Briefing, *Tajikistan Early Warning*, op. cit.

³¹ Anora Sarkorova, "Tajikistan's battle against beards to 'fight radicalisation'", BBC News, 21 January 2016. Ishaan Tharoor, "A city in Tajikistan is drawing up lists of women who wear hijabs", *The Washington Post*, 22 August 2016; "Isfara resident jailed for shooting cell phone video of detention of women wearing hijab", Asia-Plus (www.news.tj/en), 31 May 2016. See also: "Минкультуры разрабатывает образцы исконно таджикской одежды" ["Ministry of culture is developing the samples of the original Tajik clothing"], Radio Ozodi, 21 July 2017.

³² Sarvinozi Ruhulloh and Shahloi Abdulloh, "Баъзе мақомдорони тоҷик зани худро ба ҳичобпӯшӣ маҷбур мекунанд" ["Some Tajik officials force their own wives to wear a hijab"], Radio Ozodi, 5 November 2016.

opposite. People from the areas known for being pro-communist [pro-Rahmon] during the war leave more. A lot of Uzbeks leave, a lot of Kulobis leave. Even Gulmurod Khalimov who left, is Kulobi, always fought on the government's side and was never in the opposition.³³

The government's refusal to distinguish violent jihadists from non-violent individuals who are visibly devout or hold anti-government views risks making all of them enemies. This contributes to popular frustration, which with the right trigger could bubble over into street protests, other types of resistance – or even violence.³⁴

IV. Conclusion

Tajikistan's current trajectory is cause for concern. In less than three years, the country's president is – in theory – obliged to transfer power. Whether President Rahmon will do so is uncertain, but either continuation or succession could result in turmoil. Feuds inside the ruling family and rivalries among Tajikistan's various regions, including those that have previously supported the president, form a turbulent political backdrop. The regime's margin for manoeuvre is narrowing in the context of a troubled economy, institutional dysfunction and growing instability in Afghanistan. The next president will inherit a fragmented state with low levels of trust in government if not deep hostility toward the state. Many constituencies possess a capacity for violence.

Foreign powers have little leverage over Rahmon's government, which is hostile to any external criticism. Western powers appear reluctant to expend limited political capital pushing for reforms that might over time strengthen Tajikistan's institutions but whose prospects for now appear remote.

Russia and China hold more cards, but have decided so far not to play them. As the main outside power engaged in Tajikistan, Russia has a major interest in securing the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border and ensuring Tajikistan does not become a victim of jihadist violence. Yet despite occasional signs of impatience, Moscow tolerates Rahmon if only for lack of a viable alternative.³⁵ China, which holds over half of the country's debt and wants to protect its growing economic assets, is also concerned about Afghanistan and has therefore stepped up security cooperation with Tajikistan.³⁶ Most of all, China seeks to counter Islamic extremism, separatism or terrorism

³³ Crisis Group phone interview, Tajik analyst, Bishkek, July 2017. Gulmurod Khalimov is a former high-ranking security official who defected to ISIS in Syria in May 2015 becoming ISIS's "minister for war". He was reportedly killed in Syria in April 2017, but in July 2017 two militants said in videos that he was still alive. Russia subsequently said it had killed him during an airstrike on Deir el-Zour, eastern Syria, on 5 September 2017. Tom Parfitt, "Russia 'kills Isis commander in Syrian airstrike'", *The Times* (UK), 8 September 2017. See also: "Islamic State Threatens Central Asia", Crisis Group blog, 8 June 2015.

³⁴ Crisis Group phone interview, Tajik analyst, June 2017.

³⁵ Crisis Group Briefing, *Tajikistan Early Warning*, op. cit.

³⁶ On 31 August 2017, Rahmon and Chinese President Xi Jinping, meeting in Beijing, signed a "comprehensive strategic partnership", including an agreement to share intelligence information. Christian Shepherd and Tom Hogue, "Tajikistan agrees to more intelligence exchanges with China", Reuters, 1 September 2017. See also, Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°245, *Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries*, 27 July 2017.

in its restive Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, which borders Tajikistan and is home to a small minority of ethnic Tajiks. Yet despite these interests, Russia and China are even less likely than Western powers to press for meaningful political or institutional reform.

Foreign powers have few good options, but they share an interest in a smooth transition whenever it occurs. Central Asian countries, Russia and China, with help from the EU and U.S., should focus in the interim on bolstering vulnerable borders to prevent violence from spilling throughout the region. With the limited leverage they have, EU and U.S. political engagement should stress the risks of political exclusion urging Dushanbe to refrain from repressive measures that could undermine the transition, triggering instead instability and violent conflict.

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