

Challenges abound for Tajikistan

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Tajikistan appears to be on a trajectory from bad to worse. The economic situation could lead to the undoing of the progress made in the last decade in reducing poverty. And, in a quest to remain Tajikistan's leader for as long as possible, President Emomali Rahmon has become increasingly authoritarian. Attempts to curb terrorism and radicalization have resulted in harsh new laws that restrict religious freedom and other basic human rights. During 2015 the regime's last official political opponent, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was disbanded over accusations of terrorism.

This development highlights that democratic reform under Rahmon's regime remains unlikely. Contrary to the regime's intentions, increasing authoritarianism combined with worsening economic conditions could create unrest and even fuel radicalization. For better or worse, Tajikistan is dependent on Russia through its economic and security sectors. As challenges to Tajikistan accumulate, this dependence is set to become even deeper.

Although Tajikistan is generally known as the poorest of the Central Asian countries, its economy developed relatively well after the end of the civil war in 1997. According to the World Bank, Tajikistan's average annual growth rate during the past decade was 7.5 per cent. During the same time period progress was made in reducing poverty.

But the Tajik government cannot take full credit for that. The country is struggling to create jobs for its growing population. The official unemployment figure at 2.5 per cent is not a trustworthy indicator of how the labour market is faring. There is no social security net to speak of and therefore little reason to actually register as unemployed. Since there are not enough employment opportunities, around 1 million Tajiks (out of a total population of 8 million) have become labour migrants, primarily in Russia.

Labour migration has played a crucial role in reducing poverty levels. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) figures show that ordinary people rely to a significant extent on remittances to keep their households afloat. Among Tajikistan's poorest, remittances cover up to 80 per cent of their annual expenditure. In 2013 the annual revenue from remittances was equal to 49 per cent

of Tajik gross domestic product (GDP). During the first half of 2015 remittances dropped by 32 per cent. The importance of remittances makes Tajikistan very vulnerable to fluctuations in the global economy and especially in the Russian economy. Consequently, the recession in Russia has caused a severe decline in the purchasing power of Tajik households.

Another factor that is probably contributing to the decline in remittances is that Russia is imposing new, stricter rules on labour migration from non-EEU (Eurasian Economic Union) countries. These rules make labour migration from Tajikistan to Russia more difficult and costly. For Tajikistan this could generate serious challenges. Many of those previously employed in Russia have returned home, adding pressure on the state.

Even if the acute consequences of the Russian recession should prove temporary, there are a number of structural problems in the Tajik economy. The quality of health care and education is worse than it was during Soviet times. Corruption is rampant; the country ranks 152 out of 175 in Transparency International's corruption perceptions index.

It is not just the economy that is in trouble. The conditions for democracy and human rights are deteriorating as well. In 2015 a number of steps were taken to ensure the regime's continued control of Tajikistan, which cemented the authoritarian path that President Rahmon has been taking since seizing power in 1992. The last remaining real opposition party in Tajikistan, the IRPT, was branded a terrorist organization and most of its leaders imprisoned in 2015. In practice, the elimination of the IRPT undermined the power-sharing agreement that ended the Tajik civil war. In December 2015, shortly after the IRPT was disbanded, a new law was proposed in parliament naming Rahmon "leader of the nation". This law grants him the presidency for life, and immunity from prosecution for him and his family.

The IRPT's downfall was preceded by a string of dramatic events: a fraudulent election in which the IRPT received zero mandates; a sudden mass defection of IRPT members accompanied by statements that there is no need for an Islamic party; and an armed confrontation between



a group of gunmen led by the deputy defence minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda (part of the opposition, and a former civil war commander) and the national security forces, which resulted in the death of Nazarzoda and 25 others. The violent altercation seemingly sealed the IRPT's fate, as the authorities called the event a coup attempt and a terrorist act. An alternative explanation is that Nazarzoda was targeted in a government-led crackdown on the opposition, and was trying to resist arrest. This is merely the latest example in a pattern of similar violent battles between the government and former opposition commanders. There were for example clashes in the Rasht valley in 2010, and in Gorno-Badakhshan in 2012 and 2014.

The regime's fear of terrorism and radicalization has also driven it to impose restrictions on religious practices and on various cultural expressions. For example, government

workers are prohibited from attending Friday prayer, and children under 18 are only allowed to go to the mosque during religious festivals and funerals. Tajik values, as defined by the regime, are being promoted in a bid to counter foreign influences. For example, having a long beard, or wearing an Arab-style hijab instead of a traditional Tajik headscarf, is prohibited, as is giving children Arabic names. The regime probably views these measures as necessary to stop the spread of fundamentalist Islamic ideologies. The regime's fear is not completely unfounded: according to official Tajik figures, 1 000 Tajiks have left to fight with the Islamic State. Perhaps the most famous example is Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, the head of the Tajik Special Forces (OMON), who joined IS in May 2015.

But the harsh laws that the regime has implemented in response to the terrorism threat risk alienating parts of the

population, and this at a time when the economic situation is worsening. Radicalization, which the regime says it wants to prevent, has many roots, one of which is poverty. Another is oppression. Thus rather than diminishing the threats to the regime, the opposite may occur.

Although the external terrorism threat is often used as an excuse by the regime to deal with internal issues, spillover from Afghanistan of various kinds does threaten Tajikistan. The security situation in northern Afghanistan has deteriorated over the past year. The Taliban may not pose a serious threat to Tajikistan, but the Tajik authorities now worry about the establishment of an Islamic State branch in Afghanistan, and the drug trade from Afghanistan via Tajikistan continues to flourish.

Tajikistan is unable to handle its own security. This is due to a lack of resources, and when it comes to guarding the Afghan border to difficult geography and corruption as well. Tajikistan's military employs 8 800 personnel (with an additional 7 500 in the paramilitary forces). The Tajik security sector is heavily dependent on Russia. Tajikistan has no defence industry and mainly relies on Russian weapons and equipment. Russia maintains a base on Tajik soil, the 201st Motorized Rifle Division, at which 7 000 soldiers are stationed. In contrast with previous plans to increase the number of soldiers at the base, Russia has indicated that it will be downsized from a division to a brigade. Preliminary analyses of this news suggest that the drawdown is prompted by financial issues and Russia's need of the resources elsewhere.

In addition to manning the base, Russia patrols Tajik airspace. Tajikistan is also a member of the Collective

Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is dominated by Russia. In late 2015 Russia moved some of its Tajikistan-based troops from Kulyab close to the Afghan border to Dushanbe. Given the internal turbulence in Tajikistan during 2015, one cannot but wonder if it played a role in the decision to relocate the troops. Tajikistan's dependence on Russia is such that, should safeguarding the stability of Tajikistan require external assistance, Russia would be the country providing it. If there is another civil war, Russia could determine whether the Rahmon regime stays or not.

Since independence, the Rahmon regime appears to have tried to establish Tajikistan as a sovereign country with its own national identity. For example, Tajikistan has held off joining the EEU because it is likely that membership will affect Tajikistan's trade with China negatively. At the same time, it has been unable to reduce its dependence on Russia. With the new Russian labour migration rules, Tajikistan is faced with a dilemma. It could in time be forced to join the EEU. China is the larger trade partner, but China does not guarantee the Rahmon regime's survival – something that Russia could do. The regime's attempts to consolidate power combined with Tajikistan's increasing socio-economic problems could therefore create an even greater need for Russian assistance. However, Tajikistan's dependence on Russia comes at a price for Moscow as well. If Tajikistan becomes a failed state, or succumbs to civil war again, Russia will have to deal with the consequences.

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