

American Foreign Policy Council

TAJIKISTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 7,910,041

Area: 143,100 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Tajik 79.9%,
Uzbek 15.3%, Russian 1.1%,
Kyrgyz 1.1%, other 2.6%

Religions: Sunni Muslim 85%,
Shi'a Muslim 5%, other 10%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$7.592 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated
September 2013)



A rash of recent violence in Tajikistan provides clear evidence of an Islamic re-awakening taking place in the former Soviet republic. This Islamic re-awakening is being supported and sustained by changes taking place within Tajik society itself, as families increasingly turn to Islamic leaders and doctrine for aid and advice and as Tajik youth embrace the Muslim faith in greater numbers. There have been real fears among observers that the attacks and bombings in Tajikistan may be merely a foretaste of greater instability to come, and growing Islamic militancy.

However, over the past two years, despite a rapid succession of violent attacks fueled by militant Islamists which culminated in the prison break of 25 inmates with extremist ties, Tajikistan has proven itself to be resilient. It has not succumbed to the growing Islamic insurgency within its borders, nor has it experienced greater instability as many had predicted. Nevertheless, Islamic radicalism remains a real concern, and adherence to it has been fanned by the policies of the Tajik government, which has failed to address the basic social and economic needs

*of ordinary Tajiks, and whose heavy-handed security tactics in response to violence have alienated many. Tajikistan, especially after the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2014, still retains the potential to become, in the words of one observer, “a hotbed of Islamic insurgency capable of destabilizing Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole.”*¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The end of the Soviet Union brought independence as well as instability to Tajikistan, as regional clans who “enjoyed privileged economic status during the Soviet era” sought to maintain their grip on the levers of state power.² Former Communist political elites from the Kulyab region in southeast Tajikistan seized control of Dushanbe and elected Emomali Rakhmonov as President.³ An opposition group, the *United Tajik Opposition* (UTO)—comprised of Islamists from the *Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan* (IRPT) and secularists, including democratic, nationalist, and separatist movements—coalesced to oppose the new government, provoking the Tajik civil war.⁴ That conflict raged until 1997, when the Tajik government and the UTO agreed to a ceasefire and a UN-brokered peace deal. The peace deal gave the UTO, mostly the IRPT, a 30 percent stake in the central government.⁵

In spite of the power-sharing agreement, the Islamists suffered a blow to their prestige and credibility; the Tajik people recognized the motivations of the IRPT and their betrayal of Islamic principles in favor of a union with secularists through which to fight for power.⁶ And although the IRPT survived as an Islamic political party, the only one of its kind in Central Asia, it has effectively been marginalized.

As the IRPT increasingly has resorted to political maneuvering to stay in power and remain relevant, *Hizb ut-Tabrir al-Islami* (HuT, the Islamic Party of Liberation), has gradually grown to become Tajikistan’s most prominent Islamist group. According to experts, HuT’s ability to “frame the social and economic problems in Tajikistan as a result of secularism, widespread corruption in the government, Western cultural influence and the absence of a strong universal Islamic state” has given the group “ideological superiority” and put it in a favorable position to recruit disillusioned Tajiks.⁷ HuT calls for the peaceful overthrow of the Tajik government and its radical but non-violent approach has also succeeded in attracting extremists to its ranks, and has opened the door for more radical and violent Islamist groups, like the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU), to re-emerge.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

During the late summer and early fall of 2010, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) demonstrated a rejuvenated ability and eagerness to carry out violence in Central Asia, and even ventured to establish ties with European-based terrorist operations. The IMU's renewed sense of radicalism was in large part the result of the death of long-time leader Tohir Yuldashev, who was killed in an August 27, 2009 drone strike by Coalition forces in Afghanistan.⁸ Yuldashev had been "quite content operating as an armed wing for the Taliban in Pakistan, working as a supporting group."⁹ This resurgence was demonstrated in the August 2010 jailbreak of 25 inmates with Islamic militant ties from the State Committee for National Security's high-security prison in Dushanbe,¹⁰ as well as the September 2010 suicide car bomb attack on a police station in the Northern Tajikistan city of Khujand—an attack the IMU has been accused of masterminding.¹¹ Also in September 2010, the IMU conducted a brazen ambush of a Tajik military convoy in the Rasht Valley, killing 25 soldiers.¹² Abdufattoh Ahmadi, a spokesman for the IMU, issued a statement claiming responsibility and demanding that the Tajik government cease its crackdown on Islamic society.¹³

This series of violent events sparked a government campaign to capture the escaped inmates and counter the growing insurgency in the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan. The initiative was brutally effective, resulting in the decimation of the IMU, including the killing or capture of many of its senior leaders.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the IMU recovered. But as Tajikistan and other Central Asian security services continue to increase their abilities in detecting and disrupting terrorist activities, the group has shifted its operations into "more permissible and target-rich environments" in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁵ Although the IMU recently issued a new official statement advertising recent battles in Afghanistan and Pakistan and promised future large-scale operations, experts agree that such claims are merely aspirational and that the IMU, likely numbering no more than a few hundred fighters, does not now pose a significant threat outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir arrived in Tajikistan in the late 1990s and rose to prominence among the country's Muslims while its sometime competitors, notably the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, declined in popularity. The former lost its religious cachet as it developed into a political party and migrated into the political mainstream, while the latter joined the Taliban against U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan and was almost completely routed as a result.

Like the IMU, HuT has called for the overthrow of the Tajik government,

albeit through peaceful means, in order to establish an Islamic state. Over time, it became popular among ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks alike through the widespread promulgation of radical Islamic literature. The two groups, however, gravitated to HuT for different reasons; Uzbeks in Tajikistan joined on account of the group's promotion of Muslim solidarity, while Tajiks joined to rally against the rampant social and economic problems in Tajik society.¹⁷ Recognizing the threat, the Tajik government moved swiftly to declare HuT an illegal political party in 1999, and subsequently arrested and prosecuted HuT members under Article 187 (arousing religious and ethnic dissension) and Article 307 (calling for the overthrow of the government) of the Tajik criminal code.¹⁸ Between 2000 and 2005, about 500 alleged members of HuT were arrested.¹⁹

In the aftermath of Tajikistan's passage of its controversial and repressive religion law, the *Law on the Freedom of Consciousness*, in March 2009, the Tajik government's military offensive against radical Islamists in the Rasht Valley and its continuing anti-extremism and counterterrorism campaigns has placed intensifying pressure on both moderate and extremist Islamist groups. Due to the intense crackdown on HuT, Tajik authorities suspect that the group has gone underground, making it more difficult to fully eradicate. Tajik security officials have admitted that the state "will continue to have problems with Hizb ut-Tahrir, no matter how hard they try to undermine them."²⁰ Nevertheless, experts consider HuT to be "the best-organized clandestine group in Central Asia," in recent years, Tajik authorities have succeeded in thwarting the group and arresting several of its senior leaders.²¹

Even though much of the Tajik government's attention has been focused on extremist Islamists, moderate Islamist groups, like the officially registered *Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan* (IRPT), have faced greater suspicion and intimidation too. While the IRPT has been nearly marginalized, in political terms, and now holds only two seats in the 63-seat Assembly of Representatives, Tajik authorities continue to obsess over discrediting and destroying the organization, which they believe to be a gateway group to radical Islam. Even though the IRPT has complied with registration procedures and operates as a political party, the Tajik Interior Ministry has dubbed the group's members "fundamentalists."²²

President Emomali Rahmon and his government have reason to fear the IRPT. This is not because the IRPT is fundamentalist, or because it is suspected of radicalizing its members; to the contrary, experts agree that "it is often the IRP that is the best gauge of the country's true political and religious leanings."²³ Rather, the IRPT is seen, first and foremost, as a political challenge, one that requires discrediting. This has included government

descriptions of the party having a “façade” of democracy and liberalism, while harboring the desire “to turn Tajikistan into an Islamic state.”²⁴ Based upon their approach, President Rahmon and his government appear to believe that the popularity of the IRPT, rather than the socio-economic and political conditions endemic in the country, are a primary driver of the radicalization of Tajik Muslims.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islamism was not always so prominent in Tajikistan. Following the end of the Tajik civil war in 1997, ordinary Tajiks grew so disillusioned by the ambitions of the warring-Islamist factions that many turned their backs on the rhetoric of religious radicals. But, over the course of the past decade, Islam has made major strides in the country. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* reports that “Islamic names are the new fashion”²⁵ and families are increasingly turning to *sharia* law to resolve disputes.²⁶ A Gallup poll conducted in August 2010—the most recent such study conducted—revealed that “85 percent of Tajiks said religion was an important part of their lives, with only 12 percent saying it was not, making Tajikistan first among Central Asian states in terms of religiosity.”²⁷ So rapidly has Islam and Islamism increased in popularity that the Tajik government now fears that it could undermine the influence of the state.²⁸

Unfortunately, modernization in Tajikistan has barely limped along, and corrupt and authoritarian elites have hoarded power and refused to invest in the country’s troubled economy and civil society. In a 2009 study, the International Crisis Group judged that Tajikistan is “far from being a bulwark against the spread of extremism and violence from Afghanistan;” rather, it said, the country looks “increasingly like its southern neighbor—a weak state that is suffering from a failure of leadership.”²⁹ The ICG goes on to explain that Tajikistan is on the road to failure as the government will be “confronted with serious economic problems” as the poor grow poorer.³⁰

Signs of disenchantment with the government and a preference for Islamic reforms began with the winter crises of 2008 and 2009, when the Tajik people shivered through harsh winters as a result of Tajikistan’s dilapidated energy infrastructure. Despite government assurances of available gas and electric power, people put their trust in collecting combustible fuel for heating and cooking. In a clear expression of dissatisfaction, some Tajiks exclaimed, “Even in the civil war we had electricity!”³¹ Outrage peaked during the economic slowdown of 2009 because the Tajik economy, fueled by remittances from Tajik migrant laborers and devastated by the lack of jobs at home and abroad, nearly failed.

According to experts, the lack of competent leadership in Tajikistan has served to exacerbate the country's economic crisis.³² Little has been done in recent years to ameliorate the worsening socioeconomic conditions of the Tajik people. Disillusionment among Tajik citizens continues to grow, due to the Rahmon's government's failure to address basic needs while flaunting its power. For example, even as the price of bread spiked in March 2011 and gasoline prices hit a new high in April 2011, the Tajik government busied itself with extravagant nationalistic projects such as the expenditure of \$30 million to build the world's tallest flagpole to fly the world's largest flag. For these reasons, Tajiks commentators have proclaimed that "people have begun to complain that what the president sees... is no more than a mirage, and has nothing to do with the realities of life in a poverty-stricken nation engulfed in unemployment and hopelessness."³³

President Rahmon's use of resources to boost his authority and power among ordinary Tajiks, however, is overshadowed by the government's security efforts. Between September 2010 and November 2011, the Tajik government waged a massive military campaign against Islamic militants in the country's Rasht Valley, leading to the deaths of over 100 people. The campaign was brutally effective; among the casualties were Mullo Abdullo, commonly called Tajikistan's Bin Laden. Every last prison escapee from the high-profile September 2010 prison-break of radical Islamic militants was likewise either killed or captured. These heavy-handed tactics have apparently carried over into the government's dealings with even non-Islamic opposition forces, too.

For example, under the backdrop of the murder of a local security official in Khorog, a border town in the Badakhshan province of southeastern Tajikistan, the Tajik government sent in heavily-armed Tajik troops to root out opposition leaders who have maintained political power and social influence there since the Tajik civil war. A tense situation already escalated into chaos and all-out street-to-street combat between government forces and local militants which resulted in one civilian death and 50 combatant deaths.³⁴ Caught in the middle were residents of Badakhshan, who are predominantly Pamiris and peaceful Ismaili Muslims. The Pamiris were already suspicious of Rahmon's rule, but now are more so than ever. Some have gone so far as to call the military intervention an "ethnic cleansing,"³⁵ while many others, who are weary of the current instability and renewed conflict between opposition leaders and warlords, speculate that the real motive behind the fighting is for control of the lucrative drug trafficking and smuggling routes along the border of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.³⁶ Whatever the motive, popular opinion against Rahmon and his governance appears greater than ever.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Fears of an impending Islamic re-awakening—and the attendant threat of anti-state terror—has led the Tajik government to launch a major effort to make the practice of religion in Tajikistan more restrictive. Even before it passed new legislation in March 2009 hindering the practice of religion, the Tajik government had a history of banning religious expression deemed foreign and religious movements deemed threatening. Hizb ut-Tahrir was declared illegal soon after its emergence in Tajikistan in 1999, and its members were arrested and thrown in jail. In March 2006, Tajikistan similarly banned the Islamic revivalist movement Tablighi Jama'at, claiming that members of the movement were perpetrating subversion of Tajikistan's constitutional order.³⁷ In April 2007, the government of Tajikistan imposed a dress code on university students by banning the *hijab*, the Islamic headscarf. Miniskirts and skimpy tops were also banned as foreign and inappropriate.³⁸

Concurrent with his suppression of threats to his authority, President Rahmon has aggressively suppressed both Islamic militants and ordinary religious activity and freedoms. In January 2009, the Tajik government formally banned Salafism as an ideological movement, claiming it to be a potential threat to national security.³⁹ Then, in March 2009, the Tajik parliament passed the new, groundbreaking religion law, artfully named the “Law on the Freedom of Consciousness,” which “imposes censorship on religious literature and restricts performing rituals to state-approved venues.”⁴⁰ The law “makes it harder for new religious communities to get registration.”⁴¹ Furthermore, it requires religious groups to report funding sources and any foreign contacts, restricts construction of new mosques and requires parental consent for young people under the age of 18 seeking religious education.⁴²

While Tajik officials claim that the new law is “fully in line with the constitution, and is a well-designed set of ground-rules that seeks principally to prevent the growth of radical religious groups,” it has been roundly criticized by international bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.⁴³ The latter has charged that the new religion law essentially legalizes “harsh policies already adopted by the Tajik government against its majority Muslim population.”⁴⁴

In tandem with the passage of repressive religious policies, Tajik government authorities have intensified monitoring of religious expression and regularly break up unauthorized religious practices. This campaign has included raids on unregistered religious schools,⁴⁵ official efforts to discourage the wearing of Islamic dress by women,⁴⁶ and pressure on Tajik parents to desist from

sending their children to religious schools abroad, where they might be radicalized.⁴⁷ This effort reached its apex in June 2011, when the Tajik government adopted a religion law forbidding children from entering mosques. The new law banned “children under the age of 18 from attending regular Friday Prayers in mosques,⁴⁸ and [held] parents of underage children caught attending Friday Prayers legally responsible for allowing them to do so.” Additionally, “The controversial law allows children and teenagers who study at religious schools to attend mosques freely and join religious associations. All other teenagers may pray at mosques only on religious festivals and at funerals.”

On these grounds, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its 2012 annual report, listed Tajikistan as one of the world’s “worst religious violators.” The Rahmon government, the USCIRF noted, engages in a systematic campaign that “suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control, and imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations linked to religious activity or affiliation.”⁴⁹

The Rahmon government has attempted to couple this repression with some key concessions. For example, in response to extensive criticism from the international community, Tajik religious authorities softened their prohibitions on religious assembly and education, proposing that approved Islamic courses be offered to children above the age of seven at main mosques.⁵⁰ It has also moved to recognize and register more mosques (doing so in particular in September of 2011). In October 2011, President Rahmon celebrated the groundbreaking on the \$100 million building project for Central Asia’s largest mosque, to be built in Dushanbe.

Yet despite these overtures, ordinary Tajiks still take a dim view of government actions. After Tajik religious authorities banned long beards, commentators leveled criticism at the government, declaring that, “Many Dushanbe residents, practicing Muslims and secular Tajiks alike, believe authorities’ obsession with beards masks a lack of ideas on how to counter the Islamic radical threat. Some government critics even argue the crackdown on facial hair will merely give radical groups a boost in recruiting new members.”⁵¹

Indeed, state pressure against prevailing socio-religious attitudes is frustrating and alienating many ordinary Tajiks and moderate Muslims. *Imams* at registered mosques, like Muhammad-jon Ortiqov of the grand mosque in Ghafurov district, have expressed concerns about the authorities’ apparent fear and suspicion of religious expression, and say such an approach is bound to alienate moderate Muslims.⁵² Further intervention in the name of suppressing extremism, experts predict, will create the opposite effect by “driving

disgruntled Muslims into the hands of covert extremist groups.”⁵³ Extremist groups like the IMU, meanwhile, will likely continue to raise the banner of violent resistance against the authoritarian and corrupt government of Tajikistan. Thus, the corruption and lack of economic reform endemic to Tajikistan, and the increasingly heavy-handed tactics of the Rahmon government against Islamists and religious freedoms writ large, have increased hopelessness and frustration and provided fertile soil for the spread of radical ideologies and extremism—trends that have the potential to threaten the peace and stability of Tajikistan, and of Central Asia as a whole.

ENDNOTES

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