

# TAJIKISTAN'S PREDICTABLE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION LATER THIS YEAR

Bruce Pannier

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On March 1, 2020, the Central Asian country of Tajikistan held its fifth parliamentary elections since 1991 independence. This election was perhaps the country's most disappointing, as the leading opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was banned after the 2015 parliamentary elections which left only pro-presidential parties with a chance to win seats. Six of seven parties contesting in the elections were pro-presidential. The campaign drew little interest among the electorate and official turnout figure for voter participation of 86.4 percent<sup>1</sup> stretched credibility. The parliamentary elections were an indication of what can be expected in November this year when Tajikistan holds its next presidential election with the only question being: will President Rahmon run for a fifth term.

Popular elections for Tajikistan are conducted only for the lower house of parliament, the Majlisi Namoyandagon. Of the 33 deputies to the upper house of parliament, the Senate, 25 are chosen local by deputies of local Majlisi (administrations) with the president selecting the remaining eight. The Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower house, has 63 seats, 41 of which are elected from single-mandate districts, and the remaining 22 from party lists, the latter, based on percentage from total votes with a five-percent threshold to receive a parliamentary seat.

As was widely forecast, President Emomali

1 ВЫБОРЫ-2020. Центральная комиссия по выборам и референдумам объявила предварительные результаты выборов депутатов Маджлиси намояндагон Маджлиси Оли Республики Таджикистан (Elections-2020. The Central Commission for elections and referenda announced the preliminary results of elections for deputies of the Majlisi Namoyandagon of the Supreme Assembly of Tajikistan), Khovar news agency, 2 March 2020 (<https://mts.tj/ru/1559/news/>).

Rahmon's ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) won the most seats, 47, taking some 50.4 percent of the vote. The PDPT claims some 500,000 registered members, more than 10 times the number of members of the next biggest party, the Agrarian Party of Tajikistan. The PDPT was formed in December 1994 and was called simply the Peoples Party of Tajikistan. In April 1998, President Rahmon became the leader of the, slightly, renamed Peoples Democratic Party of Tajikistan. The PDPT has consistently won the most seats in the lower house of parliament since the 2000 elections when the PDPT took 36 seats, then went on to win 49 seats in 2005, 55 seats in the 2010 elections, and 51 in the last elections in 2015. Rahmon has been the candidate from the PDPT in all the presidential elections since 2000.

All the parties that received seats in the 2020 also received seats in the 2015 elections. The Agrarian Party won seven seats in 2020 and five in 2015, the Party of Economic Reform won five seats in these recent elections and three in 2015, the Communist Party of Tajikistan took two seats in 2020 as it did in 2015 and 2010, and the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party each won one seat, as they did in 2015.

Notable was the absence of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The 2020 parliamentary elections were the first the IRPT did not take part in since 2000. The IRPT was the second largest political party in Tajikistan. The IRPT was part of a coalition of opposition groups that fought the Tajik government during the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war. The peace accord the rivals signed on June 27, 1997 provided for the wartime opponents to share power in the government. The opposition were to be given 30 percent of the places in all levels of government. It did not reach that percentage at the top levels of government and in the years that followed the percentage gradually tipped in favour of Rahmon supporters.

The IRPT had always won two seats in parliament

since the 2000 elections, but in the March 1, 2015 parliamentary elections the party failed to win any seats. The IRPT’s registration was revoked on August 28, 2015, just before a Tajik deputy defence minister allegedly tried to stage a coup on September 4, which was quickly put down with most of the alleged plotters killed.<sup>2</sup> The government tied the attempted to the IRPT, though there was no compelling evidence to suggest a link. By the end of September 2015, Tajikistan’s Justice Ministry declared the IRPT to be a terrorist organization and banned its activities.<sup>3</sup>

Thirteen IRPT leaders still in the country were detained, convicted, and given long prison terms (party heads Saidumar Husaini and Muhammad Hayit were sentenced to life in prison). UN Special Rapporteur David Kaye said after the June 2, 2016 convictions of the IRPT leaders, “The harsh sentencing of multiple opposition leaders reflects the steady increase of restrictions on freedom of expression in Tajikistan,” and “The crackdown on IRPT over the last year silenced one of the few opposition voices in the country, seriously compromising the prospects for public participation in Tajikistan’s political life.”<sup>4</sup>

The absence of the IRPT in these latest parliamentary removed the key group in offering alternative policies to those of the government and ensured there would be no controversies during campaigning. The Social

Democratic Party of Tajikistan SDPT, led by Rahmatullo Zoirov, is a genuine opposition party and it did participate in the March 1, 2020 elections. But the party has only some 10,000 members and Zoirov’s request, subsequently denied, for the Central Elections Commission to lower the registration fee of 5,800 somoni (not quite US \$600) per candidate indicated how low the party’s finances are. In the end, the SDPT fielded only five candidates and received a mere 0.3 percent of the vote.

In such a situation, the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) chose to deploy an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) of only “seven international staff, drawn from OSCE participating states...” that did not “carry out systematic or comprehensive observation of voting, counting and tabulation on election day”. Mission members did “visit a small number of polling stations on election day.” In such a situation, the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) chose to deploy an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) of only “seven international staff, drawn from OSCE participating states...” that would only visit a small number of polling stations and would not “carry out systematic or comprehensive observation of voting, counting and tabulation on election day.”<sup>5</sup> It was a sharp reduction in terms of personnel and duties compared to previous parliamentary elections in Tajikistan. ODIHR sent 180 observers to Tajikistan’s parliamentary elections in 2015,<sup>6</sup> 277 observers to the elections in 2010,<sup>7</sup> and 177 to

2 “Death Of A Fugitive: Abdulhalim Nazarzoda, Tajik General Blamed For Recent Violence”, Farangis Najibullah, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 8 September 2015 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-general-nazarzoda-deadly-attacks/27233955.html>).

3 “Shattered Tajik Islamic Party Branded As Terrorist Group”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 September 2015, (<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-islamic-party-terrorist-organization/27277385.html>).

4 “UN expert deplors harsh sentencing of Tajikistan opposition leaders and warns of radicalization”, United Nations Human Rights Office of the Commissioner, 7 June 2016, (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20064&LangID=E>).

5 “Parliamentary Elections, 1 March 2020”, OSCE website, (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/443986>).

6 “OSCE/ODIHR opens election observation mission for parliamentary elections in Tajikistan”, OSCE website, 20 January 2015, (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/135281>).

7 “Parliamentary Elections, 28 February 2010”, OSCE website, ([https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/eoms/parliamentary\\_2010](https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/eoms/parliamentary_2010)).

the elections in 2005<sup>8</sup> to monitor campaigning, voting and vote counting.

The elections also seemingly failed to capture the interest of most voters in Tajikistan. Not only was there little doubt about the outcome, there was also limited opportunity for parties and candidates to advertise themselves. Under Tajikistan's electoral rules, the state provides each party with 50,000 somoni (about US \$5,150) and each candidate with 5,000 somoni (about US \$515) for campaigning purposes. No private funding is allowed. Each party is given 40 minutes and each candidate 20 minutes of free time on television and radio to make their case to voters. Candidates can augment their funding by up to 29,000 somoni (some US \$3,000) and parties by up to 58,000 somoni (some US \$6,000). Candidates and parties are prohibited from using foreign funding. However, twenty minutes of air time is not much especially as state media devotes so much coverage to the activities of President Rahmon, the leader of the PDPT, and funds provided by the state are insufficient to cover the costs of printing campaign posters and brochures, and organizing rallies.

Reports before the elections indicated many people did not know most or even any of the candidates competing, and many reports in Western media noted the results of the elections seem to be fait accompli.<sup>9</sup> Given that,

8 "Parliamentary Elections, 27 February and 13 March 2005", OSCE website, ([https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/eoms/parliamentary\\_2005](https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/eoms/parliamentary_2005)).

9 "Tajikistan set to elect parliament loyal to strongman leader", Reuters, 1 March 2020, (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tajikistan-election/tajikistan-set-to-elect-parliament-loyal-to-strongman-leader-idUSKBN2001DB>), "Tajikistan president's loyalists expected to dominate vote", Associated Press, 1 March 2020, (<https://apnews.com/206bd7ca0449049bfa1a6f0399aec6e1>), "Opposition sidelined as Tajikistan votes in parliamentary polls", AFP, 29 February 2020, (<http://www.digitaljournal.com/news/world/opposition-sidelined-as-tajikistan-votes-in-parliamentary-polls/>

it seems strange that the head of the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda, Bakhtiyor Khudoyorzoda, announced on March 2 that 4,245,951 of 4,929,120 citizens, or 86.1 percent registered voters, cast ballots.<sup>10</sup>

There were 39 locations in 30 countries outside Tajikistan where Tajik citizens could vote.

More than one million mainly working age Tajik citizens, or some 20 percent of eligible voters, are migrant labourers, at least 800,000 of them in Russia. There were five places where Tajik citizens could vote in Russia; at the embassy in Moscow or consulates in Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, St. Petersburg, and Ufa, but Tajik migrant labourers are spread throughout Russia, working, for example, in Vladivostok, Sakhalin Island and other areas in Russia's Far East that are thousands of kilometres from the closest Tajik consulate in Novosibirsk. Some are working in Russia illegally and likely would not dare to make a trip to the embassy or consulates. And some would find it difficult to convince their local employers to allow them to leave worksites to go cast ballots. Even with the opportunity for early voting, there is little chance even ten percent of eligible Tajik voters working in other countries would have cast ballots.

There were reports and even some video evidence that showed people voting multiple times, or a single individual depositing

article/567979), "Tajikistan's election mystery: Why is it happening?", Eurasianet, 28 February 2020, (<https://eurasianet.org/tajikistans-election-mystery-why-is-it-happening>).

10 ВЫБОРЫ-2020. Центральная комиссия по выборам и референдумам объявила предварительные результаты выборов депутатов Маджлиси намояндагон Маджлиси Оли Республики Таджикистан (Elections-2020. The Central Commission for elections and referenda announced the preliminary results of elections for deputies of the Majlisi Namoyandagon of the Supreme Assembly of Tajikistan), Khovar news agency, 2 March 2020 (<https://mts.tj/ru/1559/news/>).

ballots for an entire family on election day.<sup>11</sup> There have been reports, notably from OSCE observer missions, of such violations during all of Tajikistan's previous elections. More than 230 international observers did monitor Tajikistan's parliamentary elections. ODIHR, despite deploying only an Election Assessment Mission (EAM), said it would release a final report on Tajikistan's parliamentary elections before the end of April. Of the remaining international observers, 158 were from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and 15 were from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). CIS and SCO regularly monitor elections in member states and typically assess these polls as having met all the necessary standards for transparency and fairness. Tajikistan's March 1, 2020 elections were no exception. A March 11 statement from the CIS mission reported the elections were conducted in accordance with Tajikistan's constitution and the electoral laws, that there were no violations in the work of the Central Elections Commission, the nominations and registration of candidates, or during campaigning.<sup>12</sup> The March 3 statement from the SCO assessment mirrored that of the CIS monitors.<sup>13</sup>

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11 "Tajikistan: Fraud-ridden election hands crushing win to ruling party", Eurasianet, 2 March 2020, (<https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-fraud-ridden-election-hands-crushing-win-to-ruling-party>).

12 ЗАЯВЛЕНИЕ Миссии наблюдателей от Содружества Независимых Государств по результатам наблюдения за подготовкой и проведением выборов в Маджлиси намояндагон Маджлиси Оли Республики Таджикистан (Declaration of the Mission of observers of the Commonwealth of Independent States on the results of observation of preparation and conduct of elections to the Majlisi Namoyandagon of the Republic of Tajikistan), Executive Committee Commonwealth of Independent States website, 11 March 2020, ([http://www.cis.minsk.by/news/13289/zajavlenie\\_missii\\_nabljudatelej\\_ot\\_sng\\_po\\_rezultatam\\_nabljudenija\\_za\\_podgotovkoj\\_i\\_provedeniem\\_vyborov\\_v\\_madzhlisi\\_namojandagon\\_madzhlisi\\_oli\\_respubliki\\_tadzhikistan](http://www.cis.minsk.by/news/13289/zajavlenie_missii_nabljudatelej_ot_sng_po_rezultatam_nabljudenija_za_podgotovkoj_i_provedeniem_vyborov_v_madzhlisi_namojandagon_madzhlisi_oli_respubliki_tadzhikistan)).

13 Заявление Миссии наблюдателей от Шанхайской организации сотрудничества по итогам наблюдения за ходом подготовки и проведения

As low key as Tajikistan's parliamentary elections might have been, they did reinforce the belief that there will be no surprises in November 2020 when the country holds its presidential election. After Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev officially stepped down from his post on March 19, 2019 (though many feel he still leads the country), Emomali Rahmon became the longest serving president in the CIS and one of the longest serving leaders in the world today. Rahmon was elected chairman of Tajikistan's Supreme Soviet in a secret ballot in November 1992 and barely one week later the post of president was abolished, making Rahmon (then still using the Russian version Rahmonov) the leader of Tajikistan, though in name only. The civil war had been underway for a half year by that time and the government had lost control over many areas, particularly in the eastern part of the country. Rahmon's ascension to leadership was supported by commanders of Popular Front units, paramilitary groups that were often lawless and as dangerous to the population as they were to their enemies in the civil war. They continued to exert great influence on Rahmon's policies throughout the war and at times force changes in key ministerial posts. These Popular Front commanders were among the first to be purged in the years after the civil war. For a decade before the IRPT was banned and declared an extremist group, many of its leaders were harassed and some beaten. With all these groups now gone, Rahmon faces no organised internal challenges. His family has increasingly gained influence in politics with his daughter Ozoda, 42, now serving as head of the presidential apparatus and his oldest son Rustam Emomali, 32, currently the mayor of the

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выборов в Маджлиси Оли Республики Таджикистан (Statement of the Mission of Observers from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on the results of the preparation and conduct of elections to the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation website, 3 March 2020, (<http://rus.sectsc.org/news/20200303/634600.html>).

Tajik capital Dushanbe. His family, mostly the relatives by marriage, now dominate Tajikistan's business world.

The recent parliamentary elections were confirmation Rahmon is firmly in power and capable of orchestrating the upcoming presidential election as he wishes. There is talk that after 28 years in power and at 68 years of age (which he will turn on October 5, 2020), Rahmon is considering stepping down and installing his choice as successor. Both Ozoda and Rustam Emomali have been mentioned as possibilities. However, Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev left office when he was almost 79 years old and Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, died in office at age 78 in 2016.