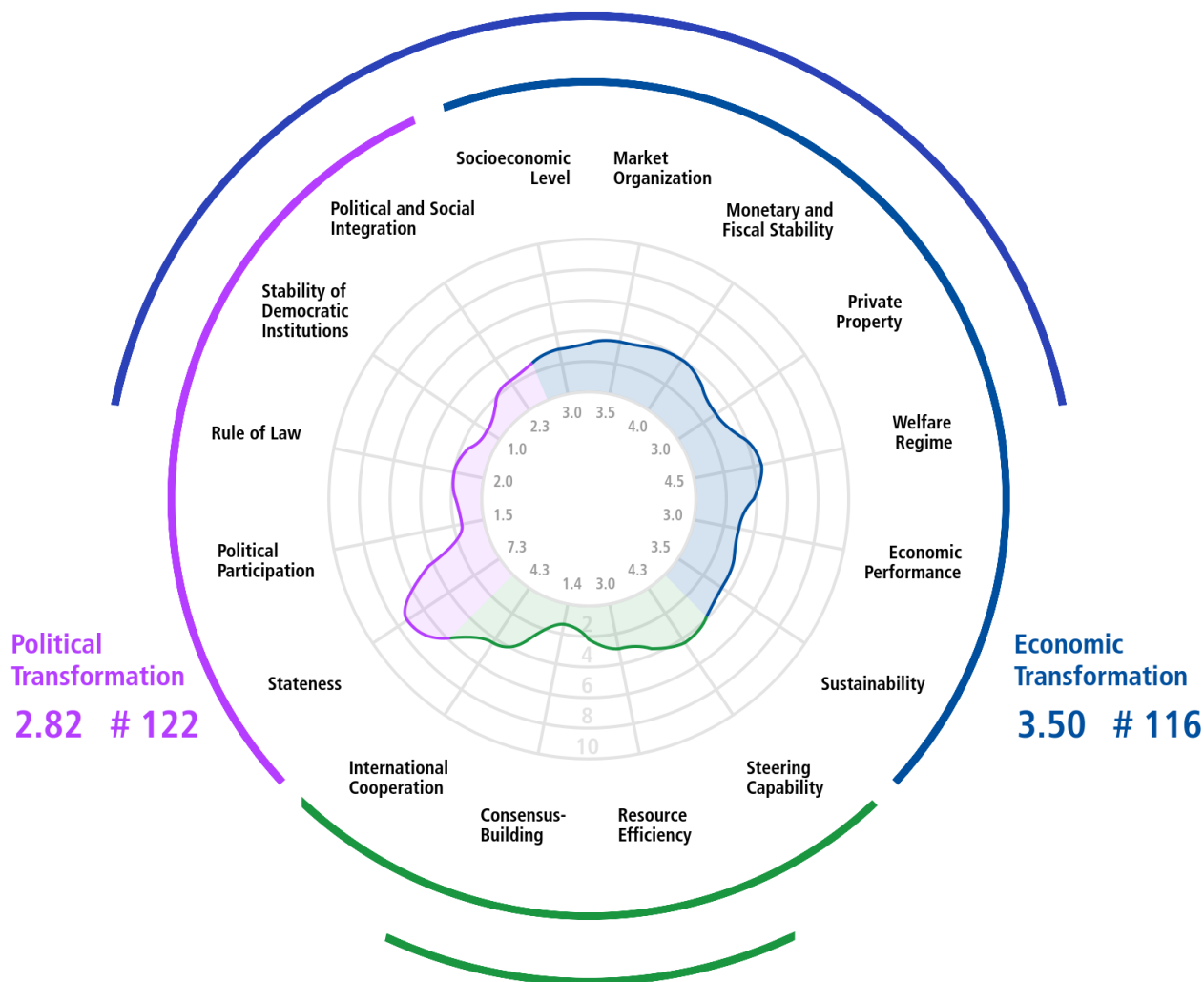


Tajikistan

Status Index

3.16 # 121

on 1-10 scale out of 137



Political Transformation
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on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024**. It covers the period from February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2023. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

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Key Indicators

Population	M	10.0	HDI	0.685	GDP p.c., PPP \$	4885
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	2.1	HDI rank of 189	122	Gini Index	34.0
Life expectancy	years	71.6	UN Education Index	0.701	Poverty ³	% 25.7
Urban population	%	28.0	Gender inequality ²	0.285	Aid per capita \$	56.1

Sources (as of December 2023): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | UNDP, Human Development Report 2021-22. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.65 a day at 2017 international prices.

Executive Summary

In the period under review, Tajikistan's authoritarian entrenchment continued. President Emomali Rahmon, his family, and a small group of confidants have monopolized power and are in firm control of the political institutions and the major economic enterprises in the country. In the last parliamentary and presidential elections in 2020, the president and his ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) formally reinforced their control over the political system. Although Rahmon is expected to stay in power until 2027, he is preparing for a dynastic transition of power. He appointed his eldest son, Rustam Emomali (born 1987), as chairman of the Upper House in 2020. The composition and nature of the authoritarian, clientelistic and patriarchal regime centered on President Rahmon changed very little in the reporting period. Criticism by Western states has become less vocal, and interventions by international human rights organizations fall on deaf ears. In 2022, Human Rights Watch stated, "Tajikistan's human rights record continues to deteriorate amid an ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression and the political opposition, as well as the targeting of independent lawyers, journalists and family members of opposition activists abroad. Authorities' use of torture to obtain confessions remains a serious concern."

While the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the cynicism and blatant lack of professionalism, accountability and transparency among the authorities and political elite, the pandemic did not destabilize the system itself.

Security problems in recent years have been domestic in origin, despite the government's attempt to present them as originating externally. The regime has further marginalized regional groups and ethnic minorities. In particular, the Pamiri-Ismaili community has been systematically persecuted in recent years. In May 2022, security forces conducted a series of violent operations against informal authorities in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), resulting in 80 fatalities and 200 arrests, mostly among civil society activists. The security situation in Afghanistan and the Middle East, where a sizable yet unknown number of Tajiks have joined the Islamic State (IS), has had little direct impact on Tajikistan's internal stability to date. After the

takeover by the Taliban and the rushed NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Rahmon adopted an antagonistic policy toward the country's southern neighbor and has repeatedly issued warnings regarding a spillover of violence from Afghanistan and an Islamist destabilization of the region. Rahmon has sought to acquire international security assistance and presents himself domestically as the guarantor of stability and order. While relations with the country's neighbor Uzbekistan continued to improve in the period under review, border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan over water distribution, land tenure and access to markets escalated in the northern Sughd region, resulting in more than 150 fatalities in September 2022.

The war against Ukraine has diminished Russia's political influence in Tajikistan and the region. Nevertheless, Moscow still maintains significant political, military and economic influence over the regime in Dushanbe.

International aid aimed at governance reform has declined in political significance, as Chinese loans and credits have significantly increased. This trend has served to bolster the power of the executive branch over other institutions – a shift that has been further expedited by the pandemic. The regime establishes strategic objectives and sustains cooperative relations with donors and the United Nations. Civil society, on the other hand, continues to struggle due to its weakened and divided state, compounded by significant pressure from the government and reliance on external donors.

Tajikistan continues to be the most remittance-dependent country globally, with approximately 30% of its GDP comprised of remittances. Nevertheless, the recent international sanctions imposed on Russia, coupled with the slow economic recovery following the pandemic, have once again underscored both the unpredictability of labor migration and the vulnerability of Tajikistan's economy to external shocks. The year 2022 was expected to see a decline in remittances due to Russia's involvement in the war in Ukraine, thereby putting the resilience of the Tajikistani population to a rigorous test once more.

The government continued to focus its economic development strategy on large-scale hydropower and transportation infrastructure projects. Aluminum and cotton remain Tajikistan's primary exports. Throughout the reporting period, construction on the Roghun Dam continued; however, logistics disruptions affecting key components produced in Ukraine, financial constraints and skilled labor shortages have delayed construction. The business environment continued to be dominated by state-owned utilities and enterprises owned by associates of the regime. In practice, most families outside the privileged elites struggle to subsist and rely on the dwindling remittances from labor migrants for their livelihoods. The government has so far resisted Russian pressure to join Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian Economic Union.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

Tajikistan, formerly the poorest republic of the USSR, still holds this status within the former Soviet space. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, independence was overshadowed by a profound political and economic crisis that resulted in Tajikistan's descent into a five-year civil war (1992 – 1997). This conflict was waged between government loyalist commanders, led by Rahmon since November 1992, and commanders who pledged their allegiance to the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a diverse movement comprising various political and regional groups. Accurate casualty figures are unavailable, and for political reasons, no commission of inquiry has been initiated to ascertain the facts and identify abuses committed during the conflict. Nevertheless, estimates suggest that the death toll ranged from 50,000 to over 140,000, with the majority consisting of civilians. Additionally, more than half a million individuals were internally displaced or sought refuge outside the country.

In 1997, the government and the UTO signed a peace accord under United Nations auspices and created the National Reconciliation Commission to supervise the peace process. The Commission's last meeting was held in 2000. Elections to a new bicameral parliament were held in March of that same year, formally bringing the peace process to a successful end. Tajikistan is among the few post-conflict countries to have transitioned quickly from war to internal stability and to have formed a functioning government. Most remarkably, the order was reestablished without the liberal reforms deemed essential by international actors. Nevertheless, the country has experienced several incidents of minor armed conflict since 1997, each of which was suppressed by the government. The main opposition party, the Islamic Revival Party (IRPT), whose members were allied with the UTO, held a handful of posts in the government until the mid-2000s, as well as two seats in parliament from 2000 to 2015. In 2015, the IRPT lost its representation in the parliament and was declared a terrorist organization, and its moderate leader Muhiddin Kabiri fled into exile.

Although Tajikistan is burdened with a deteriorating public health system, education system and infrastructure, it has made economic progress since the war. According to official statistics, the economy has demonstrated strong growth, averaging 7% annually since 2000. External debt has been halved, and the poverty level has decreased from 83% of the population in 1999 to 27% in 2019. However, this growth is only partially the result of structural reforms and a recovery in capacity utilization. Most of the country's growth has been aided by favorable world prices for aluminum and cotton and, most importantly, increasing remittances from Tajik labor migrants in Russia. Tajikistan is ranked as one of the most remittance-dependent states in the world.

Since 2000, the idea of stability has consistently taken precedence over any substantial progress toward democratic reform. The parliamentary and presidential elections held between 2000 and 2020 merely validated the current system and received limited criticism from the international community. After the peace agreements, Rahmon adopted a policy of incorporating influential opposition figures into prominent roles and offering them a share of power.

Since 2010, Tajikistan has become a consolidated autocratic state. Dissidents, potential opponents and those who fall out of favor are often suppressed, jailed or forced to flee the country. Some have even been killed abroad. Politics in Tajikistan rely heavily on patronage networks and personal loyalties. Governance is frequently conducted through informal channels. NGOs are weak and have little presence beyond the capital city and some other major towns. Local governments known as jamoats and neighborhood committees called mahallas play a significant role in local decision-making. However, they lack autonomy from the central government and are characterized by a patriarchal mode of governance. Electoral democracy and a market economy are merely a façade for a consolidated autocracy and a patron-client system.

Over the past decade, Tajikistan's authoritarian government has propagated an exclusive nationalism that combines ethnicity with a concept of traditional Islam, legitimizing the president's rule and a strong patriarchal turn in societal affairs. Minorities are systematically marginalized.

Tajikistan is a necessary security partner, albeit weak, for Western states, Russia and increasingly China. The country has managed to engage with and extract resources from all of these great powers to the benefit of its regime. Due to its extensive border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan is considered strategically important for combating extremism and the drug trade. However, it has largely remained unaffected by the strategic balance of the conflict and the perceived threat of transnational Islamic militancy within Central Asia. Despite repeated claims since the beginning of the 21st century that instability in Afghanistan and the Middle East would spill over into Tajikistan, this has not materialized.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Transformation Status

I. Political Transformation

1 | Stateness

Tajikistan is a consolidated authoritarian state that maintains a complete monopoly on the use of force across its entire territory. Incidents of terrorism are relatively uncommon compared to global standards. Instances of violence are primarily linked to organized crime, specifically trans-border drug trafficking. While the authorities often highlight the risk posed by militant Islamic groups, these groups have not demonstrated an actual ability to pose a substantial challenge to the state, and the threat is likely greatly exaggerated.

In May 2022, the government carried out a significant military operation in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), aiming to disrupt informal networks consisting of local authority and civil society actors. The operation resulted in over 80 civilian deaths and the arrest of 200 individuals. Although these informal networks were mostly dismantled and the government established complete control over GBAO, the relationship with the local population remains strained, primarily due to ongoing repression and alienation.

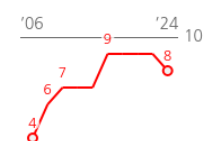
Conflicts over water distribution, land ownership, and access to markets between Kyrgyz and Tajik communities in the northeastern border districts of Isfara and Bobojon Ghafurov escalated in September 2022, resulting in more than 100 fatalities on both sides. The origins of the conflict date back to Soviet times and the peculiarities of an unmarked and singularly complicated border. Neither the Kyrgyz nor Tajik governments intervened preemptively to avoid violence. Instead, both governments aggravated the tensions by employing fierce nationalist rhetoric, ultimately leading to military clashes. However, the border conflict with Kyrgyzstan does not challenge the state's territorial integrity as such.

The security structures underwent an overhaul during the reporting period that included significant assistance in training and equipment from China, Russia and the United States. Additionally, there was an improvement in both political loyalty and the operational capacity of the country's internal security agencies.

Question
Score

Monopoly on the
use of force

8



1

A large majority of the population accepts the legitimacy of the Tajik nation-state. At the same time, natives of the former opposition regions (Rasht Valley and GBAO) feel increasingly marginalized due to their economic, cultural and social exclusion, as well as continuous repression by state security. In the reporting period, the regime particularly targeted the Ismaili-Pamiri communities in GBAO, who are portrayed as Shi'ite Muslims (as opposed to the Sunni Tajiks) and non-Tajiks. According to the last official census conducted in 2010, ethnic Uzbeks comprise 14% of the population. This statistic is commonly believed to be inaccurate, in part due to the politicized nature of the census, which discouraged citizens from claiming an Uzbek identity and, in some cases, was deliberately manipulated by local authorities. The number marks a further decline in the share of ethnic Uzbeks estimated by censuses in 2000 (16.5%) and 1989 (23.5%). Most independent analysts put the share of Uzbeks in Tajikistan at about 20% to 25%.

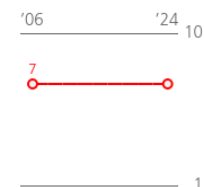
The government's ethnic-based nationalism and exclusive identity politics generate a sense of unity among ethnic Tajiks but contribute to the alienation of many members of ethnic and religious minorities. Politically, Tajiks hold all major posts, and proficiency in the Tajik language is required for all major political officeholders. Government attempts to strengthen a Tajik national identity vis-à-vis traditionally strong regional affiliations continue to be undermined by the prevailing distribution of government positions, which strongly favors individuals from Danghara district in southern Tajikistan – President Rahmon's native district.

While all citizens are formally granted equal rights, widespread corruption and nepotism increasingly limit access to certain rights for those who are wealthier and have influential connections. Women, youth and minorities continue to be marginalized and frequently face informal obstacles in exercising their civil rights. Although access to citizenship is formally granted to all groups without discrimination, there is a significant movement toward nativization, as evidenced by an official state list of approved baby names and stringent regulations on "russified" surnames (those ending in *ev/ov(a)*).

The only known groups that have questioned Tajikistan's stateness are clandestine and banned radical Islamic groups – notably Hizb ut-Tahrir, Jamaat-e-Tabligh, the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat Ansarullah and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. However, since 2015, the banned IRPT has replaced these groups in the government's security discourse. The prevalence of these groups is unknown, but they are unlikely to be widespread within the country due to the effects of state surveillance and repression. The IRPT's chairman, who is in exile in Europe, has consistently denied that his party is involved in terrorist attacks and has vowed to adhere to democratic principles and a peaceful political struggle.

State identity

7



Formally, Tajikistan is a secular state, and the law forbids any religious involvement in political matters such as election campaigns or the work of state bodies. However, in the past decade, the authoritarian state has imposed strict control over religious affairs and integrated Islam into its authoritarian identity politics. Religious belief is an important part of Tajik culture, and religious dogmas informally influence politics and the law by implicitly confirming patriarchal concepts of social and political order. As a legacy of the post-civil war peace accord, the regime allowed the moderately Islamist IRPT to operate legally until 2015, but this opposition party has now been outlawed and declared a terrorist movement.

The government has increased the capacity of official institutions regulating religion, such as the Islamic Center and the Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebration and Ceremonies. Both institutions certify religious personnel, pay salaries, impose a uniform dress code, monitor mosques and religious schools, and distribute mandatory topics for the important Friday sermons. Government intervention has reduced the diversity of religious practice and undermined the independent authority of religious figures in the country. In 2012, three new articles were added to the Code of Administrative Offenses to punish those violating the Law on Religion's tight restrictions on religious education and unsanctioned ties with foreign institutions.

In 2019, the parliament passed amendments to the Census Law, and in 2020, the national census for the first time included a question on religion. This provision violates domestic laws and international commitments that guarantee the right to privacy and the freedoms of thought, conscience and religion.

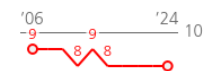
The government's formal secularism and its belief that only a specific interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam truly represents the Tajik people constitute a form of dogma that greatly hampers religious freedom. This in turn exacerbates political polarization within the country and leads to the marginalization of religious minorities, particularly the Ismaili Muslim minority.

The state maintains a highly centralized, though multilevel, system of administration throughout the entire territory. The system includes all major civilian institutions, such as local governments functioning at the municipal, district and provincial levels; a system of courts; tax authorities; law enforcement agencies; and local health and education departments that supervise hospitals and schools. All spheres of public service suffer from underfunding, rampant corruption, arbitrary intervention by superordinate authorities and inadequate technical facilities. The official response to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 clearly demonstrated these deficits (see BTI 2022).

During the review period, the authorities continued to implement a variety of significant infrastructure projects in the transportation, electricity and heating sectors, largely thanks to substantial Chinese funding. However, in colder periods lasting from one to six months, large areas in the Rasht Valley and, at times, the entire GBAO

No interference of religious dogmas

8



1

Basic administration

6



1

Province remained isolated from the rest of the country. Despite investments in hydropower and the power supply system, there has been a shortage of energy supply, particularly during winter. Continual power outages severely hamper the functioning of hospitals and schools.

The provision of basic services remained undermined by low public expenditures in the social sector. In 2020, the World Bank stated that only 55% of Tajikistan's population had access to an improved drinking water source. Although this statistic has improved over time, it still aligns Tajikistan with sub-Saharan African states. However, those states never had the infrastructure development that Tajikistan benefited from due to Soviet modernization programs.

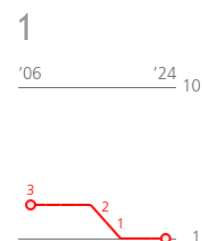
2 | Political Participation

General presidential and parliamentary elections are regularly conducted in Tajikistan at the national level through unhindered universal suffrage with secret ballots. However, elections and the multiparty system are mostly an orchestration of democratic processes and institutions for an international audience. Local and international observers have characterized all past elections as fraudulent and lacking in even basic political competition. There has been no change in presidential leadership since 1994. The president-led People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) has controlled the parliament since 2000, when it served as the basis for consolidating regional elites and the allies of the president under a single political party. Public trust in the election process remains very low.

Parliamentary and local elections were held in March 2020, followed by presidential elections in October of that year. Without significant campaigning, the parliamentary elections kept the PDPT in power with an overwhelming majority. A handful of remaining seats were distributed among five minor parties that barely register in the public consciousness and are explicitly loyal to the president. The only remaining legal opposition party, the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), did not clear the 5% threshold and therefore is not represented in parliament. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which was a party to the peace agreement signed in 1997 and until 2015 was the most important opposition party, has been banned and its leading members are in exile or imprisoned.

The OSCE election observation mission's final report on the parliamentary elections stated that the elections took place in a "restricted political space" and failed to provide a level playing field for candidates. The elections were not administered in an impartial manner, and voting included significant shortcomings. Additionally, disregard for counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed.

Free and fair elections



In the local elections, which were not monitored by international observers, the PDPT won an absolute majority in all district and city councils. In October 2020, Rahmon was re-elected as president for a fifth consecutive term (until 2027) with 93% of the votes. The four rivals to Rahmon were largely unknown to the public and received between 1.5% and 3% of the votes without any campaigning. This indicated a massive election engineering campaign, since each contender needed the signatures of at least 5% of registered voters in order to formally register as a candidate.

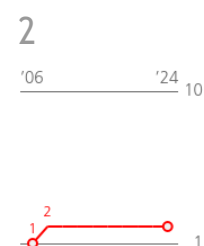
The president maintains an uncontested monopoly on the governance of the country, although his election is only de jure democratic. The majority of crucial decisions are made by the president and an informal circle consisting of his family members and close associates. There are no significant veto players. Parliament possesses limited competencies and essentially acts as a rubber stamp for the president's initiatives. In 2016, the president's eldest son, Rustam Emomali, assumed the role of mayor of Dushanbe, and in 2020, he became the chairman of the parliament, the country's second-most important political position. Consequently, it appears that Rahmon and his family are gearing up for a dynastic transfer of power.

The constitution guarantees the freedom of association, but the government severely restricts this right in practice. Some loyal political parties are allowed to operate because they are not considered to hold serious political ambitions in their own right, while instead helping the regime sustain a democratic facade. Groups and individuals critical of the government, and particularly of the president, are systematically harassed, imprisoned and persecuted. This has included Group 44 and human rights activists in GBAO. The actions of such groups are strongly restricted at the district level, where local administrators unscrupulously curtail them. Citizens have the legal right to join trade unions, but these associations are largely subservient to the authorities and are unable to organize members effectively.

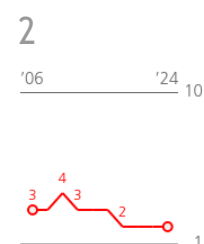
Watchdog-type organizations, which are typically funded solely by foreign sources, are subject to strict monitoring. As of 2015, NGOs are required to register all activities that receive foreign funding with state authorities. Additionally, in 2019, the Law on Public Organizations further strengthened legal regulations for NGOs. For example, organizations must now have a website that discloses comprehensive legal and financial information about their activities. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence indicating the repression of intellectuals, potentially leading to an increase in the number seeking refuge abroad.

The law provides for freedom of assembly, but this right is often restricted and denied by the government in practice. Local government approval is necessary to hold public demonstrations, and officials generally refuse to grant permission, making gatherings illegal in almost all cases.

Effective power to govern



Association / assembly rights

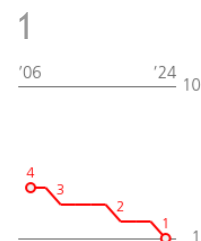


The freedoms of expression, speech and the press are guaranteed by Tajikistan’s constitution. However, in practice, freedom of speech is restricted by government interference, widespread self-censorship, a lack of independent financial support for journalism and severe criminal libel laws. The government owns all television stations and controls broadcasting facilities, leaving little room for independent news and analysis on TV and radio. Coverage of particular topics, such as the war in Ukraine or the GBAO special military operation, is closely monitored or forbidden outright. The popular Russian satellite TV service offers no alternative and has contributed to the proliferation of anti-Western propaganda in Tajikistan. Independent newspapers have shut down due to political pressure, harsh libel laws and financial constraints. The state has increased its capacity to censor and restrict internet access. In 2020, the parliament enacted a law that allows authorities to block websites or social networks without a prior court order. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the parliament passed laws penalizing the spread of “misinformation.”

Websites run by independent news agencies based outside of Tajikistan are frequently blocked, and local websites are routinely closed by the monopolistic internet provider due to “maintenance” reasons. Internet penetration is estimated at 22% (2022), with significant differences between urban and rural areas. In regional comparison, internet access is expensive, while internet speeds are among the world’s lowest (136th out of 142 countries surveyed in the Speedtest Global Index). Tajikistan was ranked 152nd out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ 2022 World Press Freedom Index. According to Reporters Without Borders, independent journalists are regularly subjected to interrogation by intelligence officers, as well as intimidation and blackmail. The organization writes: “The authorities continue to step up their control of communications using new technology and have created ‘troll factories’ to discredit critics. The blocking of the main news websites and social media is now virtually permanent.”

Over the reporting period, several journalists experienced intimidation, violent assaults, arrest or prosecution. In 2022, three citizen journalists who utilized social media platforms for their reporting were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in closed court proceedings. Additionally, family members of journalists were subjected to harassment and threats. Furthermore, individuals are increasingly singled out for their social media and blog posts, with young women in particular being publicly shamed for violating an informal national moral code.

Freedom of expression



3 | Rule of Law

The executive maintains tight control over Tajikistan's legislative and judicial branches. Despite the constitutional provision mandating the separation of powers and their institutional differentiation, the president and his inner circle hold a formal and informal monopoly on power. Checks and balances are both formally limited and largely ineffective due to informal modes of governance. With regard to the judiciary, it is the president's prerogative to nominate and dismiss judges at all levels, and the courts generally yield to the rulings issued by the prosecutor's office. The bicameral parliament, which is largely dominated by the president's PDPT, has limited authority and typically votes as directed by the executive, thus failing to exercise its constitutional powers. Parliamentary debates mainly take place when specifically requested by the executive. The majority of parliament members are previously high-ranking executive branch officials who have been appointed to parliament as a form of quasi-retirement.

The removal of presidential term limits in 2016 has increased the office's power, while the move to ban religious parties serves as a constitutional guarantee against the return to legality of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The president appoints and dismisses senior members of the government, provincial governors and district heads, including the mayor of Dushanbe. Likewise, the president appoints judges and high court justices.

A 2009 change to the legal framework for local government – initiated and supported by representatives of the international community – has not yet had any noticeable effects on the power of local authorities in relation to the national state. Since the local elections in 2020, the PDPT has maintained control over all city and district councils, rendering any prospect of genuine independence nonexistent.

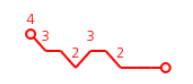
The judiciary in Tajikistan is de jure independent and institutionally differentiated, but in practice, it remains tightly subordinated to the executive. There is no practical separation of powers. The president controls the judiciary through his constitutional prerogative to nominate and dismiss judges at all levels, as well as the prosecutor general. Appointments are not merit-based. The courts are also influenced by the rulings delivered by the prosecutor's office, which holds greater influence and political power.

In politically sensitive cases, legal proceedings are held in camera, and judges rule as instructed by powerful officials in the presidential administration. Judges who exercise even a minimal degree of judicial independence have been prosecuted. Defendants in political cases have no access to legal assistance. Independent defense lawyers have been arrested on politically motivated charges after having defended opposition politicians or dissident intellectuals, as in the case of Buzurgmehr Yorov (see BTI 2018).

Separation of powers

2

'06 '24 10



Independent judiciary

2

'06 '24 10



Once charged, individuals are almost always convicted in all but the most exceptional cases. Additionally, the operation of the judiciary is significantly hindered by functional deficits such as widespread corruption, limited resources and inadequate training. In 2020, a new law on extremism went into effect, featuring a vague definition of extremism that enables authorities to suspend online communications and freeze bank accounts without prior court hearings.

Rampant corruption and abuses of power have remained an integral part of Tajikistan’s political system, despite repeated presidential announcements that anti-corruption efforts were being stepped up. Public prosecutions of corruption happen almost exclusively at the lower levels of the state administration, particularly in the health, education and agriculture sectors. In the period under review, there were a few cases of mid-level officials said to be involved in corruption and bribery. Otherwise, high-level figures, who are often members of the president’s family or his inner circle, are rarely penalized for corrupt practices. Many senior officials in the Tajikistan government have secondary roles in the business sector and hold extensive properties in the country and abroad. This is typically tolerated unless an official falls from grace for another reason.

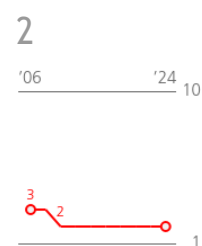
All civil rights are enshrined in domestic legislation in accordance with international human rights standards. However, in practice, civil rights are severely restricted and systematically violated. Arbitrary arrests, lengthy pretrial detentions, torture and abuse remain systematic. Torture and deaths continue to occur in custody. Conditions in prisons remain life-threatening due to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and high instances of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. In 2018 and 2019, security forces quelled two riots in penal camps, reportedly killing more than 80 inmates, including former members of the IRPT.

Members of the LGBTIQ community face systematic repression and even violent assaults. Since 2017, the Ministry of Interior has demanded that members of the LGBTIQ community register with the state. The state media reproduces Russian anti-Western propaganda, criticizing societal diversity and civil liberties.

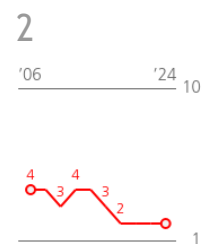
Police and security forces often violate citizens’ civil rights and are rarely prosecuted for those offenses, which contributes to a culture of impunity. Corruption, patronage and the arbitrary application of the rule of law hinder justice mechanisms. Domestic violence against women continues to be widespread, and cultural and institutional obstacles discourage women from seeking redress for rights violations.

Religious groups that do not adhere to the national brand of Islam, as defined by the government’s religious administration, are subject to particular pressure. The police frequently crack down on public observance of religious practices or alleged “alien” Muslim attire, such as the hijab or a “Muslim” beard. During the period under review, dozens of nonviolent Muslims were detained and sentenced to lengthy jail terms, mostly without a fair public trial, for alleged membership in banned Islamic groups. Non-Muslim religious groups, including several Christian churches, remain subject to persecution through bureaucratic and administrative means.

Prosecution of office abuse



Civil rights



4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Tajikistan is an authoritarian state, where democratic institutions and processes are merely a facade. Governance is monopolized by the president and his inner circle. The executive, legislative and judicial powers simply respond to decisions made within this circle. The parliament tends to refrain from exercising its constitutional powers, and the courts often rule as advised by the prosecutor or the executive. Opposition political parties and independent media groups are weak and are tolerated as long as they do not challenge the regime. Although the institutional framework for democratization formally exists, it does not function. The presidential, parliamentary and local elections in 2020 were highly controlled and fell significantly short of meeting any democratic standards. The prospects for meaningful democratic reform in the near future are dim.

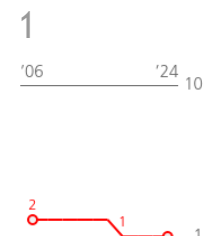
According to its constitution, Tajikistan is a democratic state. However, the commitment to democratic institutions is merely superficial. These institutions, as they exist, are widely perceived as lacking legitimacy or a popular mandate based on elections. The country has limited experience with democracy, and many older citizens associate political pluralism, media freedom and election campaigning with the political confrontation and violence witnessed before the civil war. The Tajik opposition groups in exile are divided and hold no sway over political developments within the country. A growing number of young people feel abandoned and marginalized by the current government, prompting them to seek alternative sources of inspiration, such as religion. The official handling of the pandemic further reinforced this perception. Migration, primarily to Russia, remains a significant option for those who possess higher-level qualifications and want to leave the country.

5 | Political and Social Integration

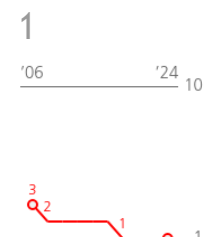
Tajikistan formally has a functioning multiparty system; however, political parties lack deep social roots and do not play a significant role in political mobilization. In 2020, six political parties were elected to the lower chamber of parliament, known as the Majlisi Namoyandagon. These parties included the Agrarian Party (APT), the Communist Party (CPT), the Socialist Party (SPT), the People's Democratic Party (PDPT) and the Party of Economic Reforms (PER). It is worth noting that these parties are loyal to the president, with the PDPT holding near-total control over the political space within the party system. Therefore, membership in the PDPT is compulsory for all civil servants at high and medium levels.

The only remaining registered opposition party, the SDPT, has been marginalized and repressed by the authorities and therefore failed to clear the 5% threshold in the election. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), represented in parliament from 2000 until 2015, was banned in 2015 on charges of terrorism and now exists only in exile. The 2016 constitutional referendum codified the exclusion of "religious" parties from politics.

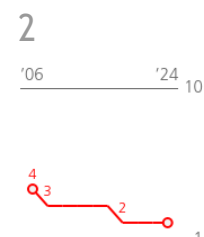
Performance of democratic institutions



Commitment to democratic institutions



Party system



The opposition in the country and in exile remains fragmented and divided. Under the consolidated autocratic system, opposition parties are monitored by the authorities and are allowed to function only as long as they do not challenge the regime. In October 2018, the IRPT's Chairman Kabiri established the National Alliance of Tajikistan as an association of the exiled opposition. However, due to conflicting political views and personal distrust among members, the impact of this alliance on Tajikistan's politics has remained very limited. Nonetheless, the authorities labeled the National Alliance a terrorist organization in 2019. In September 2022, the Russian Supreme Court also declared the IRPT a terrorist organization, facilitating the persecution and extradition of exiled IRPT members.

Interest groups exist within specific social segments and often do not collaborate with one another. These interest groups tend to be informal networks based on family, regional or professional connections, or else non-governmental organizations (NGOs). International organizations often refer to these NGOs as part of "civil society," but these organizations in fact focus primarily on technical assistance and service delivery in a limited third sector. Many NGOs function more like consulting firms than advocacy groups. Their structures and agendas primarily respond to donor requests for proposals and do not address local communities and their concerns. The majority of these organizations focus on cultural, educational, gender-related or domestic violence issues, as well as on distributing humanitarian aid to specific populations.

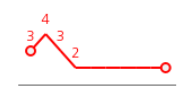
Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do provide some assistance to vulnerable groups, thus taking up some of the government's responsibilities, NGO work does not effectively mobilize civil society because the NGOs themselves view their role as service providers rather than as mobilizers of interests, resources or actions. The NGO sector has, to some extent, become a profitable market for the entrenched elite. After approximately 30 years of expansion in the number and scope of NGOs, there is significant anecdotal evidence of cynicism among both international donors and NGO representatives themselves regarding their role and effectiveness in society. As a result, the population remains comparatively inactive with regard to forming interest groups, leaving a substantial number of social interests unrepresented.

Tajikistan has limited democratic experience, and there is no reliable survey data available on the degree of popular approval for democracy and democratic institutions. The majority of the country's older population connects democracy with the socioeconomic hardships that emerged after gaining independence, along with the subsequent political polarization and the outbreak of the civil war in 1997. They generally exhibit apathy toward elections and hold disdain toward political parties. The political culture in Tajikistan remains authoritarian, influenced by the legacy of the Soviet Union and contemporary Russian media narratives that link democracy with chaos, violence and instability. The political discourse is quite underdeveloped,

Interest groups

2

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Approval of democracy

n/a

'06 '24 10

n/a 1

and the government employs a strategy of depoliticizing the public sphere. Parties lack a genuine ideological foundation or a desire to compete for power. The regime prioritizes authority and stability. Political elites adopt a patriarchal perspective on politics, which aims to rationalize the widespread presence of nepotism and clientelism in practice.

There is a low level of trust among the population, particularly between groups from different regions and ethnic and religious backgrounds. There is a deep division between the urban and rural populations. Hence, trust is extremely localized or familial, as is increasingly evident in marriage, migration and employment patterns. Official identity politics have increased the divides in Tajik society. In particular, Ismaili-Pamiris and – since the escalation of border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan – ethnic Kyrgyz are excluded from the imagined national community.

The capacity to self-organize is distributed unevenly in society. Self-organization within neighborhoods (mahalla) and in shared labor contexts (hashar) is highly developed in rural areas, where traditionally strong bonds of solidarity within villages and the extended family help individuals cope with routine problems and emergencies, such as the COVID-19 crisis. Such village-based mobilization has been widely supported by international development agencies as a stepping stone toward economic and social progress. However, rather than being regarded as ideal grassroots organizations, mahallas should also be recognized as patriarchal institutions of order that are being co-opted by local state authorities. When individuals move to the cities, most continue to support and rely on their extended families and former residents of their home region. These family- and village-based self-organized groups and associations are unevenly distributed and often resentful of each other. The patterns of social mobilization and activism during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the social fractures in society since there was limited readiness for solidarity beyond people's immediate local communities.

Social capital

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II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Tajikistan is a low-income, landlocked country in Central Asia. It is rich in hydropower potential and several natural resources, including gold, silver, antimony, coal and precious stones. Unlike some of its neighbors, Tajikistan does not have significant proven oil or natural gas reserves. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tajikistan was the country's poorest and most underdeveloped region.

Since 2003, Tajikistan has made continuous progress in poverty alleviation. The poverty rate fell from 67% (2003) to 26% in 2019. However, poverty reduction has developed unevenly, disadvantaging rural communities in the periphery of the country, and has slowed down since 2015. The economic slowdown and severe disruption of remittances during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the economic crisis in Russia due to international sanctions in the wake of its aggression against Ukraine, further increased disparities and undermined prospects for reducing poverty.

Gini Index (44 in 2018) and Gender Inequality Index (0.285 in 2021) scores suggest that inequalities in Tajik society have increased over the past years. However, unreliable national statistics make it difficult to analyze the level of inequality, especially concerning gender, religion and ethnicity. According to the Gender Inequality Index, the situation for women has gradually improved in recent years, but significant disparities remain, as shown by the 2021 World Bank Gender Assessment report. The pandemic is believed to have worsened economic disparities.

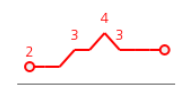
Irrespective of the improvements, Tajikistan remains the poorest of all post-Soviet states. In 2021, Tajikistan ranked 122nd out of 191 countries surveyed by the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), faring worse than all other former Soviet states and scoring only slightly above its 1990 HDI value (2021: 0.685, 1990: 0.623). Tajikistan remains one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. Remittances from labor migrants have been the key factor behind Tajikistan's economic growth and its progress in alleviating poverty. The money sent home by typically more than 1 million Tajikistan migrant workers, mostly from Russia, has in recent years provided for the most basic needs of over half of the population. However, remittance inflows to Tajikistan have shown a high level of volatility over the past decade – remittances rose in 2014 to an estimated \$3.7 billion (or 42% of GDP) but dropped sharply by over 50% by 2016 due to Russia's economic crisis following the imposition of international sanctions after its annexation of Crimea. After a substantial recovery, remittances declined again in 2020 due to the pandemic and the closing of borders. The IMF reported in September 2020 that Tajikistan's

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers

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GDP per capita has declined to \$833, below the 2011 level. In 2021, remittances hovered around \$2 billion (or 34% of GDP) but are expected to have fallen again in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine and the international sanction regime against Russia.

Poverty and social exclusion are both widespread and deeply rooted, both in terms of quantity and quality. The highest levels of poverty are found in rural areas, where approximately two-thirds of the population live in poverty and rely on subsistence economies. This is particularly true for households headed by women and households with children. Geographically, the areas with the highest poverty rates include the GBAO, the Rasht Valley, and certain isolated districts in Sughd and Khatlon that do not engage in cotton cultivation.

Economic indicators		2019	2020	2021	2022
GDP	\$ M	8300.8	8134.0	8937.8	10492.1
GDP growth	%	7.4	4.4	9.4	8.0
Inflation (CPI)	%	-	-	-	-
Unemployment	%	7.0	7.5	7.7	7.8
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	2.6	1.3	0.9	1.7
Export growth	%	21.5	21.8	55.4	-
Import growth	%	6.4	-0.4	20.0	-
Current account balance	\$ M	-185.3	335.9	734.7	1634.6
Public debt	% of GDP	43.5	51.8	42.1	32.6
External debt	\$ M	6637.1	6953.1	7046.3	-
Total debt service	\$ M	519.1	899.2	520.3	-
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-1.6	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	10.3	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	11.2	11.6	10.9	-
Public education spending	% of GDP	5.6	6.0	5.5	5.4
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.9	2.2	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	0.1	0.1	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.0

Sources (as of December 2023): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Although Tajikistan has the legal and institutional framework necessary for a functioning market economy, only some segments of the economy feature genuine market competition. Legislative and procedural rules regulating market competitiveness are unreliable and frequently ignored. Price fixing, state subsidies and endemic corruption continue to shape the domestic economy.

There is significant state intervention in the agricultural sector, which employs approximately 60% of the labor force and generated about 25% of GDP in 2021. The intervention is especially notable in the cotton sector, which represents around 60% of agricultural production and about 8% of exports (as of 2020). This intervention seems to specifically aim at safeguarding the interests of influential businessmen associated with the ruling elite. However, agricultural reforms since 2014 have brought about changes in the cotton sector, indicating a stronger emphasis on the commercialization of agriculture in Tajikistan, following in the footsteps of neighboring countries' reforms. While the ruling elite is hesitant to relinquish control over key resources, cotton farmers now have the ability to select their buyer and independently negotiate the sales price or choose to forgo cotton cultivation altogether.

Local governments throughout the country still routinely attempt to administer retail prices for basic foodstuffs, particularly around major holidays. Tajikistan imports about 75% of its food supply and 50% of its agricultural inputs, including seeds, animal breeds, fertilizers, pesticides and farm equipment.

There are no significant formal entry and exit barriers in product or factor markets. However, the informal barriers are considerable. Widespread corruption and patronage networks effectively restrict most foreign trade in certain products to members of the presidential family and senior government officials. Furthermore, businesses owned by members of the president's family are consistently granted lucrative tax and customs exemptions that effectively drive smaller competitors out of the market. Although there are legal guarantees for the freedom to launch and withdraw investments, rampant corruption and extortion by tax and regulation agencies make private investment very scarce.

The informal sector of the economy remains large, constituting about a third of GDP and providing employment to more than 40% of the working population. The national currency, the somoni, is fully convertible.

Market
organization

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With support from international financial institutions, Tajikistan has been reforming its economy to enhance business activity and increase the SME sector. However, external experts and observers have taken note of this substantial improvement with some skepticism, acknowledging positive advances in the SME sector on paper but pointing to the numerous informal restrictions. Formally, Tajikistan is a member of the International Competition Network through the State Agency for Antimonopoly and Support of Entrepreneurship.

Basic regulations to prevent monopolistic structures and conduct are in place. An anti-monopoly agency also exists, but it has generally been a marginalized body with little effective power. The agency's interventions are largely limited to preventing unwarranted food price increases before major holidays. The state itself is still the main monopolist, controlling the key sectors of the economy through the so-called natural monopolies. These monopolies shield broad sectors of the economy deemed significant to national security from competitive pressure.

Most of these monopolies, particularly in energy and transport, are undergoing gradual restructuring and privatization by members of the president's family or his close associates with little transparency or competition. For example, the Tajikistan Aluminum Company (Talco) is fully state-owned, lacks meaningful corporate governance and has a managing director who reports directly to the president. It accounted for approximately 14% of Tajikistan's exports in 2019, as well as 50% of the country's electricity usage.

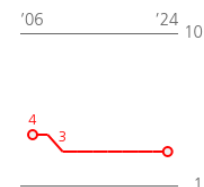
Foreign trade is liberalized in principle, but significant exceptions remain, including differentiated tariffs and special rules for state-controlled export commodities – notably aluminum and cotton. Tajikistan's trade deficit fluctuates between one-fourth and half of GDP (2020/21).

The country's economy relies heavily on the export of metals (2021: 58% of all exports), aluminum (9%) and cotton (8%). Formal tariff barriers and quantitative restrictions are generally low (usually special rules and tariffs), but there are substantial informal barriers, particularly due to the widespread corruption in the Customs Service. The country has seen certain trade areas open up and border controls relax, as well as the irregular resumption of airline flights, since relations with Uzbekistan began improving in 2016. Bilateral trade volume between the two countries has doubled since 2016, reaching \$500 million in 2021.

Apart from aluminum and cotton, which accounted for approximately one-fourth of Tajikistan's export earnings in 2019, the economy remains largely disconnected from the world market. Tajikistan has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2013. In 2021, Tajikistan's simple most-favored-nation tariff average was 8%.

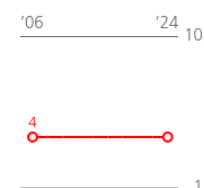
Competition policy

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Liberalization of foreign trade

4



The country's president claimed in 2014 that Tajikistan was considering joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a move that could potentially increase trade with other member states and provide better conditions for labor migrants. However, no significant progress in this direction has occurred since then, as the impact of Western sanctions on Russia and the uneven economic development in neighboring Kyrgyzstan after its accession to the EEU made membership a less attractive option. Furthermore, the ruling elite is not willing to give up its lucrative control over customs and tariff regulation.

Tajikistan's banking sector remains dysfunctional and in crisis. The National Bank's performance is limited by low capitalization and weak institutional capacity. The country lacks a functioning capital market. The capital-to-assets ratio has declined significantly in recent years (2021: 20.9%, 2019: 27.4%), while the number of nonperforming loans has increased. The consumer economy predominantly operates on a cash basis, with a high level of dollarization, and public trust in the banking sector has plummeted. Although the nonperforming loans ratio improved from 58% in 2016 to 23% in 2020, the dysfunctional banking sector will require additional financial resources in the future. During the reporting period, the National Bank revoked the licenses of two private banks, Agroinvest and Tojiksodirof.

As a recent (2021) IMF report indicates, the banking sector remains constrained by a low level of integration into global financial markets, limited credit lines, a shallow capital market, a cash-based economy, nonexistent confidence in the banking sector, a weak loan repayment culture, the decline in the national currency, and poor corporate governance and accountability.

8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

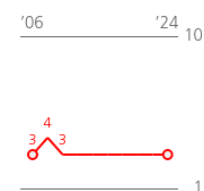
The control of inflation and the establishment of an appropriate foreign exchange policy are nominally among the most important goals of the country's economic policy. Nonetheless, Tajikistan ranks among the countries with high levels of inflation volatility. Average rates of consumer price inflation were between 9% and 10% over the review period, driven by the depreciation of the somoni.

The domestic currency is not pegged to a foreign currency but is subject to a flexible exchange rate (in 2020, one dollar corresponded to 9.5 somoni; in February 2023, the equivalent rate was 10.9 somoni). Due to the high level of dollarization, the flexible exchange rate policy has not met initially optimistic expectations. The National Bank is fully subordinated to the government, and its currency policy is dictated by stability objectives on a macro level, as advised by international financial institutions (IFIs).

Inflation and foreign exchange remain largely outside of the government's control but are influenced by wider political and geopolitical factors. Specifically, trends in global food and energy prices have a significant impact, as Tajikistan relies on

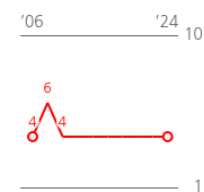
Banking system

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Monetary stability

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imports for much of its fuel and 75% of its food needs. Inflation is also influenced by global raw material prices due to the import of capital goods for massive and politically important infrastructure projects in the country. Since 2020, the COVID-19 crisis, coupled with a decline in remittances, has triggered a sharp rise in commodity prices and a devaluation of the somoni against the U.S. dollar.

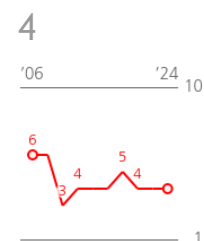
The government has declared the maintenance of macroeconomic stability to be a goal; however, its policies in this area have not always been consistent or effective. In order to contain external debt, Tajikistan has implemented a tight fiscal policy. Due to the volatile global economic development caused by the pandemic, Tajikistan's external public and public guaranteed debt increased from 43% of GDP in 2019 to 50% in 2020, and it is projected to hover at around 44% in 2021. Tajikistan faces a high risk of debt distress.

Holding about 75% of the country's external debt, China is Tajikistan's most significant lender. China's Eximbank alone holds \$2 billion, which accounts for nearly 60% of the country's entire external debt. China has obtained various mining concessions for gold, antimony and silver, and these assets are believed to serve as potential collateral for the debt owed.

The public debt is expected to continue rising in absolute terms as the country intends to continue external borrowing to invest in infrastructure and energy projects. In 2017, the government successfully issued a 10-year, \$500 million bond with a yield of 7.125% in the international government securities market. The bond was significantly oversubscribed, which might indicate that the government will resort to additional bond sales in the future. In early 2021, the government announced it would solicit \$562 million of foreign credit to continue the construction of the Roghun hydroelectric power plant. It is unclear how the government plans to repay its rising debt. The current account deficit rose to 8.4% of GDP in 2021. The IMF estimated total reserves at \$2.5 billion in 2021.

The government's tax base remains very narrow, with a significant share of revenue still linked to the performance of the cotton and aluminum sectors. The government continues to rely on international aid to meet some of its spending requirements, particularly in the social sector.

Fiscal stability



9 | Private Property

Property rights are formally defined in law, with legislative and procedural norms that regulate the acquisition, benefits, use and sale of property. However, the weak private property protection system, along with judicial corruption and state intervention, undermine the implementation and enforcement of these rules.

During the period under review, municipal authorities continued to acquire large parcels of land in major urban centers, especially in the country's capital of Dushanbe, for development at the expense of long-term residents. Although compensations for evictions have improved compared to the late 2000s, they still remain inadequate.

There is no private ownership of agricultural land, but farmers have the option to lease land parcels for life, with the right to transfer them to their descendants. However, the government can reclaim the land if it is not cultivated.

The government of Tajikistan claims to view private companies as significant players in the economy. Nearly all small and most medium-sized enterprises have already been privatized, and the privatization process is still ongoing for many large state-owned enterprises. However, the government plans to maintain ownership of certain entities, including the country's Talco aluminum company, the TajikAzot fertilizer company and major hydroelectric power stations. Privatization of state companies has not been consistent and has often been influenced by corruption and insider deals. Establishing a larger company necessitates political connections and patronage. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the private sector contributed only 17% to GDP, 24% to formal employment and 25% to investment in 2018/2019.

10 | Welfare Regime

The integrated Soviet social welfare system has steadily eroded since Tajikistan's independence. Cash and subsidy provisions for pensions, illness compensation, unemployment, disability and maternity exist in national legislation, and the right to them is generally respected. However, this compensation in most instances remains so low that members of many vulnerable groups, such as seniors or disabled citizens, would be unable to survive in the absence of additional non-state support. In July 2020, the government raised pensions and public sector wages, but minimum retirement pension rates and wages are considered precarious. An insignificant number of unemployed citizens receive unemployment benefits. Officially, the unemployment rate stood at 7.8% in 2021; however, observers estimate that actual unemployment rates are closer to 40% or 50%. Given the inflexibility of the labor market, the country will face difficulties in integrating labor migrants returning to the country.

Property rights

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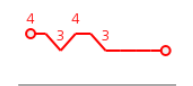
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Private enterprise

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Social safety nets

4

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Labor migration acts as an important cushion for the labor market, and migrants' remittances also provide an essential alternative social safety net for approximately two-thirds of the population. Informal self-help networks based on extended families and villages additionally serve as significant social safety nets.

The government is committed to poverty alleviation. Since 2012, the poverty rate has declined from 37% to 26% of the population in 2019. However, progress in poverty alleviation remains susceptible to external shocks – such as the recession in the Russian economy and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from poverty eradication, the welfare system has not been among the government's top priorities. Health care spending has stagnated at 7.1% of GDP in 2019, with more than half of the money allocated for salaries and maintenance. During the coronavirus crisis, the government successfully pleaded for international financial assistance. The emergency relief focused on measures to alleviate the immediate shortfalls of the public health system – for example, the lack of protective gear, testing capacity and ventilators – rather than its structural deficits. According to World Bank data, 20% of the households that sought medical help during the crisis could not obtain any. The government's welfare function has largely been limited to occasional, tiny increases in compensation rates for social risks and the repair of clinics and orphanages.

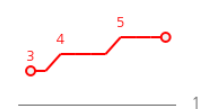
Equal access to education, public office and employment for all citizens is guaranteed by the constitution. However, in practice, equality of opportunity has not been achieved. Individuals from the Rasht and Vakhsh valleys, the GBAO, and the Uzbek and Kyrgyz minorities continue to face discrimination in government appointments and business opportunities. These opportunities are also all but denied to members of the opposition. There are no official or legal obstacles to employment, but ethnic minorities are often denied government jobs due to inadequate knowledge of the Tajik language. Education opportunities are equally open to all citizens, but corrupt admission practices limit access to higher education to those able to pay high bribes. Legal provisions against discrimination exist, but they are not consistently enforced.

Education opportunities are equally open to boys and girls at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. However, there are significant gender disparities in higher education attainment. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR), Tajikistan is ranked 114th out of 146 countries in this area. In 2018, the female-to-male ratio of individuals enrolled in higher education was 0.75, compared to a ratio of 0.9 in secondary education and 1.00 in primary education. The gender gap in higher education attainment is particularly pronounced in rural areas. The introduction of a “presidential quota” mechanism, aimed at enabling girls from remote regions to pursue higher education, has had limited effectiveness. In recent years, female participation in the labor force has increased, with women constituting approximately 37% of those working outside the home. However, this statistic does not take into account the disproportionate number of Tajikistan male labor migrants who have exited the country's labor market.

Equal opportunity

5

'06 '24 10



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Women are significantly under-represented in public offices and businesses. In the current legislative period, women hold only 19% (down from 23%) of the parliamentary seats and 6% of deputy-level ministerial positions (down from 13%). While the country's economic reform and poverty reduction strategies contain robust components aimed at addressing these inequalities, a number of institutional, social and cultural factors have hindered the implementation of these measures. The political elite surrounding President Rahmon promotes a highly conservative and patriarchal societal model, in which women and youth occupy subordinate positions.

11 | Economic Performance

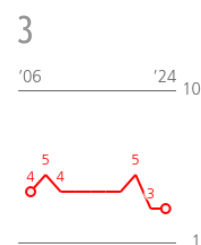
Official data from Tajikistan's government is considered unreliable by independent experts, particularly given the recent volatile global developments. According to official data, Tajikistan's economy has experienced robust GDP growth of 7% annually over the past decade. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly strict sanction regime against Russia have revealed the volatility of the country's economic development, which relies heavily on remittances from Tajik labor migrants in Russia and the export of metals. In 2020, the economic growth rate slowed to 4.4%, followed by a strong recovery of 9.2% in 2021. Due to the war in Ukraine, a slowdown in the economy is expected in 2022 and 2023.

Tajikistan operates with a significant trade deficit due to its reliance on imports for petroleum, food and capital goods. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the country's trade deficit varies between one-third and half of its gross domestic product (GDP), reaching an estimated 25% in 2022. In 2021, the official unemployment rate was reported to be 8%; however, observers estimate that the actual rate is around 40% to 50%. Furthermore, public debt is projected to increase to 50% of the GDP by 2020. In 2022, the IMF forecasts a negative fiscal balance of 2.7%. Following a positive current account balance of 4.1% in 2020, Tajikistan is expected to experience a deficit of 1% of its GDP in 2022.

The government continues to primarily rely on foreign state-led loans and investment from China and Russia instead of creating conditions favorable for private investors. Rampant corruption, nontransparent practices, problems with the power supply, poor infrastructure and a burdensome regulatory process continue to significantly hinder private investment in the country. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has decreased by half since 2020 to \$160 million. In 2021, 75% of the country's FDI came from China, and 9% came from Russia.

In October 2016, Tajikistan initiated the construction of the Roghun Dam, a \$3.9 billion project spearheaded by the Italian engineering firm Salini Impregilo. The first phase of the dam commenced operation in November 2018. It is projected that the dam will be fully completed and commissioned by 2032, providing a power generation capacity of 3.6 GW. Throughout the construction period, various

Output strength



obstacles, including logistical, technical and financial constraints, have led to delays. A 2014 assessment conducted by the World Bank substantiates the government's assertion that the Roghun Dam represents the most cost-effective solution in response to Tajikistan's energy deficiencies. Nevertheless, the studies also indicate that for the Roghun project to be financially sustainable, the government must undertake reforms within the energy sector, raise electricity tariffs and ensure that the state-run Talco aluminum smelter settles its outstanding energy bills and debt, which have accumulated over the years. Currently, it remains unclear whether the government possesses the ability or willingness to fully implement these recommended reforms.

12 | Sustainability

Environmental concerns in Tajikistan receive only occasional consideration and are largely subordinated to economic growth efforts. In the 2022 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), the country ranked 117th out of 180 nations surveyed, performing below the average for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

About 62% of Tajikistan's energy is generated by hydropower, and 37% is generated by coal. As a result of soil erosion, water pollution and deforestation, environmental degradation increasingly constrains economic growth. Cotton cultivation continues to rely on high levels of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which have severe consequences for public health and water quality. Locally, the aluminum smelter in Tursunzade, the chemical plant in Yovon, the cement factory and the heating facility in Dushanbe contribute to air pollution. Additionally, radioactive waste from the Soviet-era enrichment plant in northern Chkalovsk (now known as Buston) is stored in approximately 30 tailing dumps near residential areas without appropriate safety regulations, leading to serious public health implications. The remains of uranium, lead and mercury mining in central Tajikistan have contaminated water resources.

Environmental regulation is in place but rarely enforced – particularly in the contexts of cotton cultivation, gold mining and aluminum production (specifically water and waste management). Measures to protect the environment are largely absent from tax policies. Legal and institutional frameworks for sustainable energy use remain rudimentary. Public awareness of environmental concerns is limited.

Climate change has increased the incidence of floods, mudslides, avalanches and extreme weather conditions and has accelerated the melting of glaciers in Tajikistan, eroding the resilience of poor communities. Environmental degradation and climate change have also increased the incidence of natural disasters in the country. According to the national authorities, an average of about 150 small or medium-scale disasters occur in the country annually. However, when residents raise concerns over environmental safety, their pleas are often left without adequate response.

Environmental
policy
3

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Tajikistan's education and training system remains substandard. The country's public expenditure on education has stagnated at around 6% of GDP since 2016. However, enrollment and completion rates at the primary and secondary levels are the lowest in Central Asia. The gross enrollment rate is 99% at the primary level (2021), 82% at the secondary level (2018) and 29% at the tertiary level (2018). Nevertheless, female enrollment rates in secondary and tertiary education are significantly lower than male enrollment rates. The quality of schooling, particularly at the secondary level, is significantly impaired by a shortage of qualified teachers, low motivation levels, outdated textbooks and dilapidated school infrastructure. Most public school buildings are in need of major repairs.

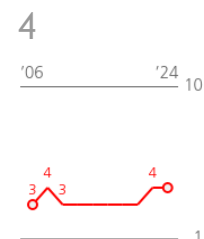
Facing a population growth rate of 2.2% in 2022 and the disintegration of the Soviet educational infrastructure, the government has implemented various reforms in the education sector, including a transition from a 10-year to a 12-year education system. However, conflicting reports regarding the implementation of the reform have emerged, and it remains unclear how the authorities plan to address the shortage of school places and teachers. Scores on the United Nations' education index have shown a slight improvement, reaching 0.682 in 2019.

Despite these shortcomings, Tajikistan retains a high literacy rate of over 99%. This rate may conceal very weak literacy or functional illiteracy among an increasing number of young people, particularly women. Most of the institutions of higher education are state-owned, but the government has consistently attempted to convince foreign universities to open branches in Tajikistan. Additionally, the country benefits from offers of subsidized placements (quotas) at foreign educational establishments, particularly in Russia, Kazakhstan and China. These quotas are then effectively exchanged for bribes. The government has created further hurdles for students seeking education abroad by demanding special permits to study, attend conferences or conduct research abroad.

Moreover, in most, if not all, of the country's higher education institutions, plagiarism by both students (in copying from textbooks or others' research) and staff (in reading from textbooks instead of writing their own lectures) is widespread and condoned.

R&D remains deficient. Public expenditure on R&D was below 0.1% of GDP in 2021. More than half of the country's researchers are employed in 13 institutions in the higher education sector, with the remainder largely working in the Academy of Sciences or in the more than 50 research institutes and design bureaus. The R&D sector suffers from severe underfunding, obsolete equipment and aging personnel. The emigration of talented scientists and researchers continues.

Education policy /
R&D



Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

The structural constraints on governance in Tajikistan are significant. Key structural issues include rugged terrain, a disadvantageous geographical location and an underdeveloped transport infrastructure. Approximately 93% of the country's territory is covered by mountains, rendering large portions of it practically inaccessible during winter and unsuitable for agriculture. Moreover, Tajikistan faces challenges due to its rapidly expanding population and progressive soil degradation, resulting in a diminishing amount of farmland available per capita.

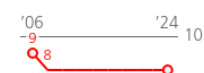
Landlocked and bordered by Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, with a position 3,000 kilometers from the nearest deep-sea port, Tajikistan is likely the most isolated country in the region, with the highest transport and logistics costs. Chinese companies have invested in roads to improve the country's infrastructure. Recently, major roads connecting the north and south of the country have been refurbished. However, transport links during the winter months are considerably impaired. Overall, the country's road and rail networks remain underdeveloped.

After more than two decades of mutual obstruction and embargoes, bilateral relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have significantly improved. In 2018, the two countries signed several agreements, lifting trade and transport barriers that had impeded regional economic integration. In 2020, Tashkent and Dushanbe settled the remaining border disputes; however, the ratification of a formal agreement is still pending. Bilateral trade has doubled since then, reaching a volume of \$500 million. Nonetheless, regional trade turnover remains low, and regional borders were closed during the pandemic. Eventually, improved regional integration and ongoing Chinese investment will gradually reduce the country's isolation and structural constraints.

Tajikistan has weak traditions of civil society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) largely depend on foreign grants for their operation, and the government has restricted their operational scope. Public trust in NGOs is low, and many NGOs resemble development consulting companies rather than advocacy or interest groups. During the period under review, the government increased pressure on human rights NGOs receiving foreign funding, forcing many to close. In December 2018, the Tajik parliament amended the Law on Public Associations, exacerbating the challenges faced by NGOs in the country. The amendments included stiff requirements on financial reporting that few NGOs are able to meet.

Structural
constraints

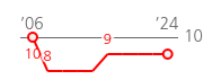
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Civil society
traditions

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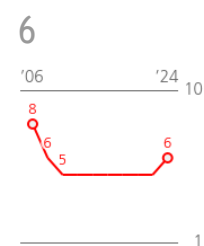
The country has a tradition of voluntary activities conducted by neighborhood groups and extended families. This tradition has not become the basis for civil society development but instead nurtures communalization. The intelligentsia, which participated actively in public life during the Soviet period, has mostly left the country or has been forced into conformity with the regime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, grassroots initiatives initially played an important role in informing the public about the disease but were later silenced by the authorities.

The government has established firm control over the Rasht Valley and the GBAO region. Specifically, the Ismaili-Pamiri community was systematically targeted during the reporting period. In May 2022, security forces eliminated the remaining informal authority networks in GBAO. According to reports, 80 people were killed and over 200 were arrested, including local civil society representatives.

During the reporting period, border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan over water distribution, land ownership and access to markets in the northern Sughd region (Isfara and B. Ghafurov districts) escalated, resulting in approximately 150 fatalities on both sides. The central governments did little to reduce tensions and instead employed fierce nationalist rhetoric, aggravating the conflict.

Tajikistan's political space remains dominated by the regime and is kept free from evidence of internal confrontation. The government represses activists from the banned Islamic groups, resulting in deep grievances that may lead to their involvement in anti-state activities. Between 2014 and 2018, a significant number of Tajikistan nationals fought in Syria and Iraq. The outflow of these fighters has decreased significantly since 2016, but the number of returnees is unknown. Although the authorities declared the Islamic State group to be responsible for a deadly attack on foreign tourists in 2018, a violent incident near the Uzbek border in 2019 and the prison riots in 2018/19, the state has not provided transparent documentation of its investigations or allowed public court proceedings. The isolated and relatively low-tech militant attacks were most likely of local origin and did not rely on a more elaborate network. The government continues to label any form of social and political opposition as terrorism and uses it as a pretext to access international security assistance.

Conflict intensity



II. Governance Performance

14 | Steering Capability

The government establishes broad long-term aims and priorities and, in most cases, pursues them without interruption or political debate. Policymakers have identified five strategic priorities, as emphasized in the NDS 2030 and the president's annual addresses to the parliament. These priorities include achieving energy independence, eliminating communications isolation, ensuring food security and access to high-quality nutrition, expanding employment and addressing the alleged increase of radical Islam. The regime's primary objective remains achieving energy independence. Construction of the Roghun dam continued during the reporting period, despite ongoing concerns related to engineering, environmental impact and financing. The president and senior officials consistently highlight the importance of constructing new hydropower plants and upgrading existing ones in order to position Tajikistan as a significant regional energy producer and exporter.

The regime also emphasizes the significance of overcoming the country's geographic isolation by building roads and railway lines to link the country with major regional economic hubs. The government has attracted Chinese investment to major road projects, but crucial regional railway projects have not yet included Tajikistan. However, the improved relations with Uzbekistan and the country's integration into the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" initiative may alter this situation.

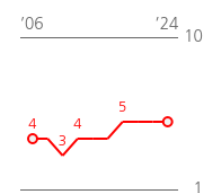
The government has also maintained its long-term priorities despite pressure from foreign donors and international financial institutions (IFIs) to invest more resources in social protection, education and health. However, its strategic capacity to organize policy measures that would support long-term aims remains impaired by low levels of professionalism, a lack of expertise and the failure to embrace evidence-based policymaking. Effectively, there are no independent think tanks or academic institutions able to critically assess government policies or the country's current situation, governance and most pressing issues, and thereby offer strategic vision and solutions.

The regime continues to assert that the development of democratic norms and institutions remains its priority. However, these assertions remain little more than empty rhetoric, primarily intended for the consumption of foreign donors, media and IFIs.

Question
Score

Prioritization

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The government has the capacity to bring together administrative, human and financial resources in order to pursue strategic priorities. The government is implementing the strategic priorities contained in the NDS 2030, as the – albeit slow – progress in constructing the Roghun Dam demonstrates. Likewise, the détente with Uzbekistan has partially ameliorated the country’s isolation.

However, given the authoritarian nature of the political system – specifically, the lack of accountability, transparency, cooperation, social inclusion and trust – these factors routinely hinder the coherence of implementation. The government’s profound distrust of any civil society involvement has clearly influenced its underlying priorities, which prioritize regime security at all costs.

In this respect, the government has achieved significant success in fulfilling its unstated objective of consolidating authoritarian rule along with its stated objective of expanding the country’s hydropower and export capacity with the Roghun Dam. However, government members are often hesitant to take the initiative in implementing strategic policies or lack the necessary qualifications to do so. The president frequently reassigns government officials, moving them from one position to another, often without regard for their expertise and skills. Consequently, numerous officials lack institutional memory or the qualifications necessary to perform their duties effectively. Furthermore, many government members prioritize personal enrichment over the welfare of their country or the continuity of government policy.

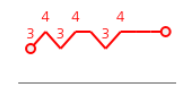
During the period under review, the government showed limited willingness and ability in the area of policy learning. The official response to the coronavirus pandemic was, to some extent, symptomatic of the state’s general steering and policy-learning capability. After a prolonged denial that COVID-19 cases had appeared in the country, the authorities eventually prioritized short-term emergency relief while silencing criticism. There was seemingly little intersectoral coordination between government agencies and health sector institutions. As in previous crisis situations, the responsible minister was dismissed; however, there was no examination or resolution of the root causes of the failure to respond to the pandemic more effectively.

There are few institutionalized mechanisms that might facilitate policymaking innovation. Any learning from past experience is significantly impaired by the practice of government reshuffling and weak monitoring and evaluation practices. Frequent workshops and study tours organized by donors and IFIs have little effect because the government sends only a select few representatives to participate. The government relies extensively on foreign consultants in devising policy measures, particularly with regard to reform efforts driven by donors and IFIs. The high degree of centralization and rigid authority structure also impede policy innovation by disallowing initiative from the lower ranks or from outside the governing circle.

Implementation

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Policy learning

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The only exception is the expanding security sector. The state has invested significant resources to enhance allegiance to the regime and improve the security forces' operational readiness, often with the help of foreign assistance. Similarly, the state's repressive capacity – via mechanisms such as electronic surveillance – has increased substantially, with frequent intrusions into citizens' social media accounts.

15 | Resource Efficiency

The government rarely uses its available human, financial and organizational resources efficiently. During the period under review, the president's extended family remained in control of all high- to medium-level appointments. The 70-year-old president personally controls all senior-level appointments to security and law enforcement agencies, as well as the army. Such appointments are mostly based on personal loyalty rather than professional aptitude. His eldest son, Rustam Emomali, was appointed chairman of the Upper House in 2020 (he is also the mayor of Dushanbe) in an apparent move to prepare for a dynastic transition of power.

Although senior government officials continuously emphasize the importance of recruiting skilled individuals for government positions, the most lucrative positions in government institutions tend to be distributed via informal mechanisms and patron-client networks. A number of public offices – particularly the President's Office, the office of the Dushanbe mayor, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – have made attempts to recruit skilled professionals for lower-ranking positions through relatively transparent and competitive procedures. However, the government remains suspicious of the hundreds of individuals who have received education in Western countries and is reluctant to hire them.

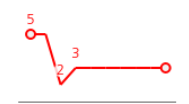
The president and his inner circle determine the allocation of the state budget, including in the area of debt management. There is no independent auditing; likewise, the parliament has no oversight over budgetary affairs.

In 2020, the government announced a local development action plan with the intention of delegating authority to local district (nohiya) and province (viloyat) level governments. However, this autonomy is limited to social affairs, and the mechanisms of delegation are often disregarded if deemed necessary by the central government.

Efficient use of assets

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The highly centralized decision-making structure enables the coordination of key policies between different ministries and agencies in cases of conflicting interests. The duplication of responsibilities by different offices has largely been eliminated in critical sectors – particularly among the security structures – but is still widespread across the government. A relatively strict hierarchy of policy priorities makes choices fairly straightforward. All policy goals are subordinated to internal security and regime survival. Decision-making on major security and foreign policy issues is monopolized by the president and his close confidants. The president also assigns responsibilities for major policy areas. At the same time, weak communication across and within agencies, inefficiency in government bureaucracy, personal distrust and corruption affect the coherence of government policy.

During the period under review, high levels of corruption and the abuse of power have remained pervasive within Tajikistan’s political system. A culture of impunity is prevalent among the security forces. The government largely fails to address or mitigate corruption effectively. Although several agencies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Anti-Corruption Agency, the Prosecutor’s Office and the State Committee of National Security are tasked with combating corruption, Tajikistan does not appear to have a cohesive anti-corruption strategy. Conflict-of-interest rules and codes of conduct are nonexistent, and independent audits are not carried out on state spending. Additionally, parliamentary discussions on the budget do not take place. Despite pressure from donors and international financial institutions (IFIs), the government has yet to establish a transparent public procurement system. Furthermore, journalists who report on corruption involving public officials face censorship and are often subjected to libel and defamation charges.

Public prosecution of corruption primarily occurs due to political considerations or at lower levels of state administration, specifically in sectors such as health, education, infrastructure and agriculture. Given that the president’s immediate circle of family and friends occupies all significant government positions, any investigation into corruption signifies shifts in the hierarchy rather than a change in political orientation.

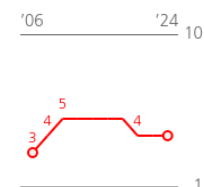
16 | Consensus-Building

All major political actors close to the president continue to claim that mature democracy is a long-term priority and that it has in fact been partly achieved in recent years. In practice, however, their commitment to democratic institutions is entirely superficial, and any Western model of political transformation is explicitly rejected. The dominant political elites are widely seen as lacking legitimacy or an election-based popular mandate.

With the exception of the Communist Party (CPT), which is becoming less relevant, all registered political parties emphasize their dedication to democracy and the free market. Some members of the ruling elite present themselves to the international community as reform-minded individuals. However, it is impossible to assess the

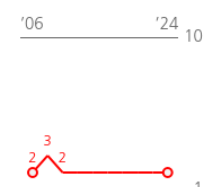
Policy coordination

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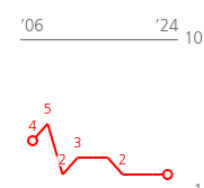
Anti-corruption policy

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Consensus on goals

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extent to which these individuals would remain committed to meaningful economic reforms if they attained full power. The important fact is that Tajikistan's political and economic system is patron-based, and therefore institutionally opposed to democratic or market reform.

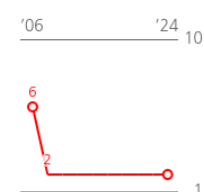
The only veto players who overtly oppose democracy in practice are the members of the ruling regime who have banned or excluded all significant political opposition in the country. There are few relevant political actors genuinely committed to advancing democratic reforms, and if they exist, they sit outside the center of power. The political culture remains closed and anti-pluralist. Over recent years, domestic and international discourse on security and religious extremism has contributed to the entrenchment of the anti-democratic power players.

As the dialogue initiatives of the post-Civil War period fade into distant memory, the political leadership has not reduced existing divisions nor prevented conflicts based on cleavages from escalating. The most influential cleavages, which are based on regional and ethnic lines, affect a wide range of people. The president's extended family and his close associates from Danghara and Kulob in the southern Khatlon region monopolize most of the high- to medium-level positions in the government as well as the most lucrative economic resources. Citizens of Gharimi origin from the Rasht and Vakhsh valleys, natives of Sughd and GBAO provinces, and ethnic Tajiks born in Uzbekistan still do not have access to political and economic resources. The significant Uzbek minority, which makes up around 20% of the population, and the smaller Kyrgyz and Slav (Russian) minorities also remain marginalized. The political elite consistently aims to suppress conflicts based on cleavages rather than moderate them. Establishing a broad societal consensus is not currently a priority for the government.

In the period under review, the government continued to promote an exclusive ethnic nationalism that merges an ethnic-based identity with a narrow conception of Tajik Islam. Official identity politics have worsened divisions along ethnic and religious lines. Specifically, repressive government policies target Ismaili Muslims. Evidently, the persistent propaganda has deeply affected how the Tajik public perceives the Ismaili community in Tajikistan, as there was no criticism of the excessive violence employed during the government's crackdown in the GBAO region, nor was there any solidarity shown with the Ismaili community. Similarly, the government did not mediate the conflict between Tajik and Kyrgyz border communities but instead heightened tensions by employing nationalist rhetoric.

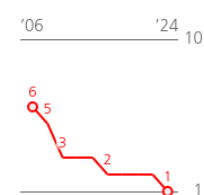
Anti-democratic actors

2



Cleavage / conflict management

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Although the government has occasionally granted civil society actors the nominal opportunity to participate in the deliberation of social policies, there is little civil society participation in the development of economic, political or security policy. Civic actors are also excluded from policy implementation and performance monitoring. They are seen as complementary service providers who must stay out of contentious issues. Civil activism is typically spontaneous, ad hoc and issue-specific, fizzling out just as quickly as it arises. The government capitalizes on this weakness and usually weathers an initial social backlash following specific incidents, then works from within to discredit social activists. During the reporting period, the demonstrative persecution of citizen journalists reporting on social issues and human rights defenders indicated a steady decline in the deliberative political process.

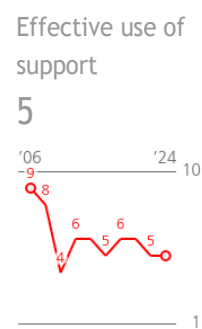
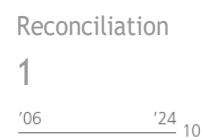
In the first decade after the Civil War, the political elite chose to avoid addressing past injustices and continued to formally practice a “forgive-and-forget” policy in connection with offenses that occurred during the Civil War between 1992 and 1997. Most crimes committed during this period are covered by a general amnesty. During the period under review, there were no significant prosecutions for non-amnestied crimes. However, the government has largely abandoned the policy of formal and informal restrictions on discussing the Civil War. Government officials, state-owned media, school textbooks, and academics and intellectuals co-opted by the state blame the political violence of the 1990s on the opposition, particularly the IRPT. Therefore, broad-based reconciliation is not possible at this time.

The ongoing political and economic marginalization of citizens of Gharimi origin from the Rasht and Vakhsh valleys, as well as the isolation of Pamiris, has increasingly led them to feel like the “losers” of the war. There continues to be a high level of distrust among the previously warring regional groups. The political exclusion of the IRPT reflects the manipulation of the past for political purposes. Surprisingly, it has provoked little domestic or international backlash.

17 | International Cooperation

Tajikistan’s government endeavors to utilize international assistance for its long-term development agenda, as outlined in the National Development Strategy 2030 (NDS 2030) and poverty reduction strategies. Thanks to significant Chinese investment and enhanced relations with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan may have the capacity to implement key aspects of the NDS, such as enhancing infrastructure and addressing the nation’s geographical isolation.

Chinese investments and credits are playing an increasingly important role in the Tajikistan economy, representing a dramatic shift from the time when the previous national development strategy was adopted. China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative presents opportunities for infrastructure investment that are not contingent on economic reform, though these may come with political and economic conditions



favoring Chinese businesses and excluding their competitors. However, foreign investment during the period under examination experienced a significant decline, from \$346 million in 2019 to less than \$160 million in 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese investment accounted for 75% of the foreign direct investment in 2021.

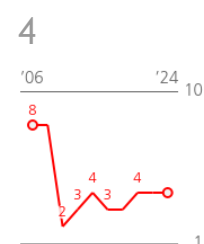
The Asian Development Bank, European Community, IMF and World Bank continued to provide direct budget support despite the country's pervasive corruption. The government has often solicited international support to cover short-term needs, particularly in addressing infrastructure maintenance and responding to natural disasters, or most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's Western partners and donor agencies often emphasize the importance of political reform during meetings with senior government officials. However, the ability of these actors to push for genuine reform remains limited. Besides, the regime is aware of and willing to make use of the major contradictions between the key Western powers' democratization and political reform agendas and their foreign policy and security interests. The government's capacity to channel available international support into long-term beneficial projects is limited.

Tajikistan's credibility as an economic and political partner is undermined by corruption. The 2008 scandal involving embezzlement and misreporting by the National Bank of Tajikistan, as well as reports of offshore companies used to hide profits from road tolls and aluminum production, contribute to a widespread perception of corruption in Tajikistan. In an effort to enhance its reputation and cultivate a more technically capable image, the government has promoted younger Western-educated officials, often from among existing elite circles, but their impact has been limited due to their frequently presumptuous behavior. Rampant corruption is a significant deterrent to foreign investment in the country's economy. Numerous government agencies and entire ministries have been blacklisted by international organizations and NGOs for misusing donor funds. Engaging with state agencies carries significant risks.

Tajikistan is increasingly viewed as a human rights pariah because of its brutal treatment of the political opposition and civil society activists in recent years, which has included credible allegations of torture. Additionally, the government has misused the Interpol Red Notice system to harass political dissidents outside the country. Equally concerning are the frequent reports that the state has extradited alleged dissidents from Russia.

Beyond the field of human rights, Tajikistan generally respects its commitment to and compliance with international agreements, such as the CIS free trade agreement or its GATS commitment to the WTO.

Credibility



The government is, in general, open to cooperating with neighboring states and supports regional integration initiatives. The country's relationship with Uzbekistan continued to improve during the period under review. The détente between the two neighbors has ameliorated Tajikistan's transport isolation and resulted in stronger regional integration, as well as increased trade volume.

At the same time, Tajikistan has taken a much more antagonistic position toward Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. President Rahmon has responded to Western security concerns and conjured the imminent threat of violence spilling over from Afghanistan to destabilize Central Asia. This appears to be done in order to access international security assistance. Simultaneously, he has capitalized on the chaotic withdrawal of NATO forces and the political crisis in Afghanistan to present himself as a guarantor of stability and order domestically. In August 2021, Russia organized joint military maneuvers with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan near the Afghan border. It is noteworthy that Tajikistan continues to export electricity to Afghanistan.

Relations with Kyrgyzstan, the country's northern neighbor, deteriorated dramatically during the reporting period. Conflicts over water management, land use rights and access to markets – which date back to unresolved border delimitation disputes from the Soviet period – escalated in spring 2021 and September 2022 in the northern districts of Isfara and Bobojon Ghafurov (Tajikistan) and Batken (Kyrgyzstan), producing more than 150 fatalities on both sides of the border. Reportedly, local networks were responsible for the immediate outbreak of violence, but the central government did little to deescalate the situation. Instead, both governments employed a fierce nationalist rhetoric for the purposes of political mobilization.

While Tajikistan has continued to participate actively in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the country's policy toward organizations considered Western has deteriorated. In 2020, Tajikistan, together with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, blocked the extension of the mandate of the OSCE's representative on freedom of media and the chairman of the OSCE's ODIHR. This resulted in a severe crisis and the resignation of the organization's top leaders. Tajikistan's confrontational policy stems from an increasingly hostile attitude toward allegedly Western concepts of development cooperation and political transformation.

China remains Tajikistan's largest creditor, accounting for an estimated 75% of the country's foreign debt (\$2.4 billion). In 2020, China established a military base in Tajikistan's autonomous GBAO region, leading to a transformation of the country's regional and domestic security dynamics. Previously, Tajikistan had relied solely on Russia for security assistance and military presence in southern Tajikistan. China's economic and political influence in the country is expected to continue expanding. The conflict in Ukraine has diminished Russia's standing as an economic and

Regional cooperation

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political partner in the region. However, Tajikistan's heavy reliance on remittances from labor migrants residing in Russia remains a source of significant leverage over the Tajik government. As a result, Dushanbe's relations with the West and its security policies are still partially influenced by its ties with Moscow.

Strategic Outlook

Tajikistan remains an authoritarian state with a consolidated elite centered around the incumbent President Rahmon and his family. Given the closed political system, the domestic opposition is unable to function effectively. The fragmented and divided opposition in exile continues to be plagued by political and personal animosities.

The government selectively follows the economic and financial policy recommendations favored by IFIs, but this has not led to broad-based economic growth but rather to the concentration of wealth in the hands of those with political connections. The presence of formally democratic institutions has not produced political competition and debate. After 30 years of authoritarian consolidation, all this is readily apparent, suggesting that international organizations committed to political transformation are to some extent complicit in the status quo. A different approach to Tajikistan is required that recognizes the state's dependency on remittances and foreign finances, as well as the fact that international actors – far from being agents of change – serve as de facto apologists for the regime if they fail to speak out against its abuses of power. Given the extent of poverty in the country, the international community should maintain pressure on the regime to provide adequate support to the failing social sector, which has been at the periphery of the government's priorities.

However, Western states, international organizations and NGOs have limited leverage over a government that is neither committed to reform nor considers itself dependent on the donor community due to the increasing role of China. FDI from Western states will remain limited due to the political risks in Tajikistan and the anti-corruption laws that companies must negotiate. Russia and China remain far more important as diplomatic actors, providers of military assistance and international investors than any other foreign actors. Tajikistan's future may be bound to the economic policies and international relations of these two states, given the country's increasing reliance on financing from and trade with China and the prominent role still played by Russia diplomatically, militarily and as the host country for most of the country's labor migrants, despite the loss of trust in Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. The question for Tajikistan, and indeed for Central Asia as a whole, is whether China's infrastructure investments will ultimately lead to Beijing playing a greater role in regional politics and any future crises.

Alongside economic stability and growth, internal security challenges remain a concern. These challenges pertain to struggles within the state among elites rather than internal terrorist or foreign threats. Localized, small-scale outbreaks of political violence will continue, but due to their isolated and low-tech character, they will not challenge the regime's stability. The border tensions between the Tajik and Kyrgyz communities will continue at a low level. A spillover of violence from Afghanistan is unlikely since dominant elites on both sides of the border benefit from the current informal arrangements, which allow undisturbed drug traffic via the Northern Route. Security assistance to such a regime effectively aids and abets misdiagnosis and mismanagement of the problem. In light of this, the international community should not provide further technical assistance to the government's security forces until they show signs of implementing reforms that would lead to accountability within the security services and acceptance of the rule of law.

While the regime is not committed to political and economic reform, it is attentive enough to maintain some support from a significant portion of the population and to allow the marginalized to leave the country via seasonal labor migration for better prospects abroad. The regime has also fostered stronger feelings of unity among the majority ethnic Tajiks by promoting an aggressive ethnic-based nationalism. Though this has apparently bolstered Rahmon's rule in the short term, it could exacerbate domestic and regional tensions in the long term. The public sphere will be further limited and monitored, leaving bleak prospects for civil society, intellectuals and dissidents.