

## A Stable Afghanistan Is Unlikely Without a Secure Tajikistan

By Richard Rousseau

Securing a stable and terror-free Afghanistan is less likely without a stable Tajikistan. The problem is that Tajikistan's stability is threatened by advanced economic decay, armed rebel groups and a corrupt political system. Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters have begun to seek refuge in the mountainous southern half of the country. Look out for Tajikistan during the countdown to NATO and American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While menacing clouds are gathering over Tajikistan and the government appears unable – and certainly unwilling – to roll up its sleeves and proceed with much-needed economic and political reforms, the world's tallest flagpole was erected in the Tajikistan capital, Dushanbe, on Aug. 30, 2011. Standing 165 meters tall, it was inaugurated with a grandiose firework display and pop music. The flagpole is three meters taller than the one flying the Azerbaijani flag in downtown Baku, Azerbaijan, the previous record holder. It is reported, however, that Turkmenistan is planning to erect an even bigger one, so Tajikistani President Emomali Rakhmon should enjoy the fame while he can. At the inauguration ceremony, a summoned representative of the Guinness Book of World Records handed Rakhmon an award and a certificate of recognition, following a speech in which the president argued the \$3.5 million flagpole would strengthen Tajikistan national identity. The president raised the award proudly over his head with both hands, as if he were holding the World Cup Trophy.

The celebration of the erection of the flagpole is symptomatic of the regime's values. Rakhmon and his "team" of kleptocrats spend millions on unnecessary things and siphon money out of an already meager state budget rather than addressing Tajikistan's enormous economic and security problems. i Corruption is widespread at all administrative levels and the profits from one of Tajikistan's only profitable legitimate industries, aluminum production, find their way to overseas bank accounts belonging to a small circle of the president's clansmen and close associates. ii The ruling elite apparently cares more about erecting flagpoles and building flashy buildings than bringing about improvements in the miserable living and working conditions of the vast majority of the population. "President Rahmon prefers to control 90 percent of a ten-dollar pie rather than 30 percent of a hundred-dollar pie," one Western ambassador was quoted as saying in a US Embassy cable disclosed by Wikileaks.

Rakhmon has sat securely in his much coveted position since the bloody civil war that ended in 1997. He has deftly concentrated power into the hands of those closest to him by outmaneuvering, imprisoning or liquidating his political rivals. Elections, or any semblance thereof, are merely a form of grandstanding with predetermined results. The opposition and civil society are openly suppressed and the media is state-controlled and plagued by self-censorship and editorial restraint. Nothing is expected to change anytime soon, because the country's constitution allows Rakhmon to remain in office until 2020. Already several of his nine children are slowly being groomed to take over key positions so as to continue his "dynasty." It is expected that they will rule in a similar style, as evidenced by similar authoritarian successions in North Korea and Turkmenistan. Meanwhile, the country's infrastructure continues to crumble; unemployment is increasing and the level of healthcare further declining. Residents of remote mountainous and rural areas live in dire poverty. Those who are able and have some skills, especially manual, try to find work abroad – mostly in Russia and Kazakhstan, where several million Tajiks have fled as economic migrants. They mostly find jobs as unskilled migrant workers, if at all. Their remittances to families back

home are estimated to account for nearly half of Tajikistan's total gross domestic product (GDP). According to data from the World Bank, nearly half (47 percent) of the population survives on less than two dollars a day.

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes conditions in hospitals as dire – in fact, practically medieval by modern standards. Doctors and other staff are often incompetent and sterilized operating rooms are hard to find, especially in rural regions. Patients often have to pay bribes for each and every stage of their treatment, from diagnosis to the emptying of filled trash baskets.

Tajikistan is not the only country languishing under an authoritarian regime while the international community's attention is focused elsewhere. Yet there are compelling strategic reasons to worry about developments in this small Central Asian republic. For the United States and other International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) countries, Tajikistan plays an important stabilizing role along Afghanistan's northern border and is a key logistical hub for the military effort against Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. French and German ISAF troops maintain bases in Tajikistan for logistical purposes and the Americans use Tajik territory for flights and limited ground transportation into Afghanistan.

Tajikistan is inextricably linked with the conflict in Afghanistan. Nearly one-third (27 percent) of the Afghan population is ethnic Tajik, including former president and leader of the High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, who on Sept. 20, 2011 was killed by a Pashtun suicide bomber in his home in Kabul.

Tajikistan shares a 1,400-kilometer border with Afghanistan but lacks the capacity to control its entire length. As the security situation in northern Afghanistan has gradually deteriorated, rebels linked to Taliban and al-Qaeda forces have increasingly crossed this long border to seek safe haven in the rugged mountainous areas of southern Tajikistan. Moreover, the influx of Afghan refugees to Tajikistan has increased significantly, doubling since 2008. Tajikistan and northern Pakistan are in close proximity to each other, separated only by a narrow strip of land in northeastern Afghanistan. It was expected that Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters would settle in remote southern Central Asian areas if they were displaced from Pakistan's northern tribal areas.

Tajikistan is also a preferred transit route for Afghan narcotics bound for Russian and Western markets. According to the UN Drug Control Agency (UNODC), more than one-third of Afghanistan's opium production is smuggled through Tajikistan. The will and means to crack down on smuggling are missing. A leaked report from the US Embassy in Dushanbe described how Tajikistan border guards, instead of using the drug detection dogs provided by the American government, simply sell them to make ends meet. Even when drugs are intercepted, more often than not, the quantity seized is small and does not hamper drug trafficking operations. The major drug suppliers are protected by senior Tajik and Afghan officials, who personally profit from smuggling. They have no interest in obstructing a good business. UNODC estimates that less than five percent of the smuggled drugs are intercepted.

While drug trafficking continues with practically no constraint, armed Islamist factions have also started stirring trouble in Tajikistan. President Rakhmon's troops have suffered considerable losses in sporadic skirmishes with guerrilla groups. Low-intensity conflict along the stretched Afghan-Tajikistani border has been going on for years, and infiltration of Tajikistani territory is on the rise. In September 2010 more than 25 Tajik soldiers were killed, according to official reports, in a single ambush on a military convoy in the Rasht valley, which lies east of Dushanbe and was a stronghold for forces opposed to the Rakhmon government during the 1992-97 civil war. This glaring failure clearly illustrates that the corrupt government of Tajikistan is badly equipped to handle even modest security threats. The army is weak and consists mostly of young conscripts from rural areas who cannot afford to bribe their way out of compulsory military service.

Rakhmon's response to the creeping Islamist threat has been to crack down on some aspects of Islamic customs. For instance, it is now illegal to send children to foreign Islamic schools and the government has tried to dictate the content of Friday prayers. Members of peaceful Muslim organizations are condemned for, and at times convicted of, made up crimes and usually given disproportionately long sentences for even minor or "imaginary" offenses.<sup>iv</sup> On August 6, 2011 President Rakhmon signed a new law on "Parental Responsibility" which forbids under-18-year-olds from attending prayers in mosques, while the police started to routinely harass believers and others with "long beards."

In Tajikistan, where 90 percent of the population is Muslim, such anti-Islamic initiatives do not engender support for the secular rulers. The Tajik government has long maintained that memories of the country's brutal civil war, which killed 50,000 people, have effectively quelled all forms of popular insurrection since then. But these memories are fading quickly, as younger generations grow up with no first-hand experience of the civil war horrors. Many analysts see the widespread poverty and bleak future outlook as key factors feeding social radicalization and increasing support for armed Islamic insurgency groups.

Rakhmon flatly rejects the possibility that a North African scenario of popular insurrection is brewing and that regime change may take place in Tajikistan. The reality on the ground, though, indicates the contrary: Tajikistan is so vulnerable that even a minor security problem could quickly escalate and threaten the regime's survival.

Recent Middle East and North African experience has reminded authoritarian regimes that a popular feeling of resignation can quickly be transformed into open rebellion. Tajikistan is far from being institutionally immune from such a development, and a further weakening of the government's control of the borders would make it an even more attractive safe haven for armed rebels trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan. There are more than enough reasons to keep a watchful eye on events taking place in Tajikistan, as ISAF's announced withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 is fast approaching.

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i See <http://europeandcis.undp.org/governance/parac/show/A4CCA91E-F203-1EE9-B559591F4804985D>; and see [http://www.undp.tj/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=523&Itemid=78](http://www.undp.tj/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=523&Itemid=78)

ii <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62564>

iii [http://www.undp.tj/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=523&Itemid=78](http://www.undp.tj/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=523&Itemid=78)

iv <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-tajikistan>