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## TAJIKISTAN: FIRST ELECTIONS WITHOUT OPPPOSITION AND EMERGING POWER TRANSITION

On March 1, 2020, the elections to Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower house of Tajikistan's parliament (Majlisi Oli), were held. These were the sixth elections after the country gained its independence in 1991. It is noteworthy that the parliamentary elections in Tajikistan are held every five years without any snap elections. There are 63 members in the lower house, with 41 elected by the majority system in single-member constituencies and 22 – on party lists with an electoral threshold of 5%. According to the voting results, the ruling People's Democratic Party won, with 46 seats, the Agrarian Party received seven seats, the Party of Economic Reforms – five, the Communist Party – two, while the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party gained one seat each. The remaining seat was won by a self-nominated candidate. Despite such party diversity, Tajikistan remains an authoritarian country, and political parties strongly depend on the government. It is widely recognized that the country's only opposition party was the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which had two representatives in the parliament from 2000 to 2015 when it was banned. The 2020 parliamentary elections were the first in which the party did not participate. In fact, two key factors should be considered when analyzing the latest elections – the absence of the IRPT and a probability of the forthcoming transit of power.

The IRPT has a long history dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. However, we will focus our analysis only on the period of the party's existence from the collapse of the USSR until 2015. After Tajikistan became independent in 1991, the IRPT held an official constituent congress in Dushanbe. During the congress, the party adopted its charter and program, and Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda was elected as the chairman. The main objective of the party was to create a democratic state with freedom of religion, but with an emphasis on Islam, and to introduce certain Sharia norms into the legislation. The experience of the Turkish Republic was supposed to be taken as a possible model of the country's development, where there was a secular state with a Muslim majority and freedom of religion. At the same time, there were supporters of the Iranian model of statehood within the party. In December 1991, the IRPT was officially registered. During the civil war of 1992-1997 in Tajikistan, the IRPT was part of the United Tajik Opposition, which confronted the central government. After the end of the civil war, the IRPT remained legal and became an opposition party.

The years until 2015 in Tajikistan were the period of power consolidation by the central government, which followed the example of other Central Asian states, except Kyrgyzstan. Against this background, the personal power of President Emomali Rahmon was gradually increasing. In 2003, the referendum on constitutional amendments zeroed out Rahmon's previous (and only permitted) presidential term and allowed him to serve two additional seven-year terms in a row. The IRPT openly protested against the amendments and even held a series of rallies. The authorities used these actions as an excuse for the arrest of some party leaders and accused them in the involvement in illegal groups seeking the overthrow of power.

While for some time after the referendum there was a truce between the regime and the IRPT, in 2015, the Tajik authorities decided to finally eliminate the IRPT from the country's political field. Initially, in the March 2015 parliamentary elections, Rahmon succeeded in preventing the IRPT from gaining seats in the parliament. The defeat in the elections and the subsequent departure of the party leader from the country opened the door for the authorities to start the persecution of the IRPT. In August of the same year, the Ministry of Justice demanded the party to cease its activity, since most of its branches in the regions did not work, and the central office was sealed by a decision of the economic court. Then, on September 13, 2015, some IRPT members were detained on suspicion of conspiracy with former Deputy Minister of Defense Abdukhalim Nazarzoda, who, according to the Prosecutor General's Office, formed 20 armed groups, planning to seize power in the country. Subsequently, in September, Tajikistan's Supreme Court recognized the IRPT as an extremist and terrorist organization and stopped its activities altogether.

The elimination of the last opposition force in the country allowed the ruling regime to complete the process of power centralization in the hands of Emomali Rahmon. In December 2015, the country's parliament adopted the law "On the Founder of Peace and Unity and the Leader of the Nation". Under this law, the incumbent president had no longer legal restrictions for the number of presidential terms. These decisive actions put an end to discussions that circulated at the time about the forthcoming transit of power.

The latest elections were supposed to show whether any centers of resistance remained in the country. A union of opposition groups located in Europe, including the IRPT, called

on its supporters to vote for the Social Democratic Party. However, after all, the Social Democrats could not receive even 1% of the votes. Thus, the authorities demonstrated complete control over the situation and over the entire territory of the country. This was also necessary against the background of new rumors about a possible transfer of power to Rustam Emomali – the eldest son of the president. Rustam Emomali will most likely become a member of the Majlisi Milli, the upper house of the parliament, where with a high probability he will be elected the chairman. According to the Tajik constitution, the chairman of the Majlisi Milli succeeds the incumbent president if the latter leaves his position. It should be noted here that the next presidential election in Tajikistan is scheduled for November 2020.

The ruling elite in a hybrid regime often perceives elections as an event that could potentially destabilize the situation. Therefore, it is important for such a regime to always control them. Since Tajikistan holds two elections in 2020, the elite might expect increasing risks to its rule. Thus, the Tajik authorities use full control over the electoral cycle to show that the IRPT does no longer represent a significant political force, especially to external players that, according to the regime, have always stood behind this party. In turn, the elections provide the opportunity for creating a new format of power. The newly elected parliament can create various additional institutions, which theoretically could leave part of the authority with Emomali Rahmon if he decides to transfer the presidential post to his son.

In conclusion, at present, the probability of power transition in Tajikistan is rather low, but there is a probability that President Rahmon wants to create an understandable mechanism in an effort to protect himself and his clan. It is rather obvious that the Tajik authorities are striving to create the tandem in power, where the president will play a key role, while his son will be preparing to seize power at any time. Besides, as often happens in such schemes, this is an opportunity to check the loyalty of the elite members and carry out its 'cleaning' if necessary. In addition, the regime uses the new status quo to demonstrate the "next leader" to external players, thus reducing a potential for destabilizing the situation from outside. It appears President Rahmon learned his lessons from the civil war when external stakeholders played key roles in domestic politics.

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## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release regarding the sixth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea. As stated in the document, Turkey does not recognize Russia's illegal action based on an illegitimate referendum. For Turkey, it remains a priority that Crimean Tatars continue to live in wellbeing and security in their historical homeland. The ministry confirmed Turkey's support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, its strategic partner (MFA of Turkey, 16.03.2020).
- President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev received Prime Minister Askar Mamin, the chairman of the State Commission for Ensuring the State of Emergency, to discuss the commission's work and decisions taken to counter the spread of the coronavirus infection in the country. The prime minister informed President Tokayev about the introduction of quarantine in the cities of Nur-Sultan and Almaty, measures to support economic entities, and the regions' preparedness for any possible emergencies (Akorda, 18.03.2020).
- The Coordination Council on issues of sanitary protection of the territories of the CIS member states held its meeting via videoconference. Council members discussed the epidemiological situation related to the coronavirus pandemic in the CIS countries and reported on their national measures to prevent the import and spread of the infection, as well to diagnose and treat the disease (CIS Executive Committee, 20.03.2020).
- President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko urged his compatriots not to panic because of coronavirus. According to Lukashenko, the current situation in the country does not require strict measures, and people simply need to observe hygiene rules. The Belarussian leader stated that mortality caused by coronavirus in January-February 2020 is lower than mortality from pneumonia in the same months of 2018 and 2019. He also instructed officials to help Belarusian and Russian citizens who are stuck abroad to return home (Mir 24, 20.03.2020).
- Following lengthy negotiations, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova and the Democratic Party of Moldova signed a coalition agreement to form a parliamentary majority. The creation of the coalition was necessary to provide political support to the current minority government headed by Ion Chicu. As a result, the democrats received half of the ministerial portfolios (Mir 24, 16.03.2020).
- The presidential election was held in Abkhazia following the resignation of President Raul Khadjimba in January 2020 due to mass protests. According to the preliminary results, opposition leader Aslan Bzhania won the election with 56.85% of votes, while his main opponent, Economy Minister Adgur Ardzinba, received only 35.44%. Ardzinba congratulated Bzhania with his victory, pledging to assist him in implementing all ideas that would benefit Abkhazia (RBC, 22.03.2020).

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- To mitigate the economic shock resulting from the coronavirus outbreak, Russia will create a 300-billion ruble (\$4 billion) anti-crisis fund as a sharp drop in oil prices has left the Russian economy particularly vulnerable. Support measures will include tax breaks for tourism companies and airlines, and the expansion of the preferential loans program for businesses. Due to the present circumstances, Russia may miss its economic growth target for 2020, originally set at 2% (Reuters, 16.03.2020).
- As part of anti-crisis emergency measures, Turkey's Central Bank reduced its benchmark interest rate by one percentage point to 9.75%. It also announced that it would provide some funding at an even cheaper rate to commercial banks that meet certain lending targets. Additional support measures include reducing the mandatory amount of banks' reserves and extending the maturity of swap mechanisms that allow banks to exchange dollars for lira (Financial Times, 17.03.2020).
- To mitigate negative consequences of the coronavirus outbreak for business entities, the Central Bank of Uzbekistan recommended commercial banks to provide them with a grace period for the repayment of loans until October 1, 2020. The recommendation applies primarily to companies involved in tourism and international freight transport, as well as businesses that have counterparts in countries with the highest prevalence of coronavirus (Central Bank of Uzbekistan, 17.03.2020).
- As oil prices continue to fall, the government of Kazakhstan takes measures to support oil companies operating in the country. According to the country's legislation, rental tax is tied to the price of oil: at a price of \$60 per barrel, the rate was 11% of the value of exports, and at a price of less than \$40, the rate is 0%. In addition, the law provides for the binding of export customs duties to the price of oil: the lower the price, the lower the tax (New Europe, 20.03.2020).
- The population's demand for the U.S. dollar has increased in Azerbaijan amid fears of another currency devaluation, while the country's Central Bank assures that it will manage the situation and maintain the current level of social welfare. However, the stability comes at a high price as the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan sold nearly \$1 billion in the first two weeks of March 2020 to support the national currency (Eurasianet, 16.03.2020).
- Turkmenistan's Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs held its forum in Ashgabat. Government officials, parliamentarians, diplomats, representatives of public organizations, universities and media attended the event consisting of an exhibition and a conference. More than 200 enterprises presented their stands at the exposition dedicated to the creation of import-substituting industries. Conference participants discussed challenges facing the business community and identified the most promising areas for investment and innovation (MFA of Turkmenistan, 17.03.2020).

## Society and Culture

- Secretary General of the Turkic Council Baghdad Amreyev and Foreign Minister of Kyrgyzstan Chingiz Aidarbekov met in Istanbul to address pressing topics of the organization's agenda and cooperation among its member states, including the establishment of the Joint Investment Fund. The parties also discussed the upcoming World Nomad Games to be held in Turkey in the fall of 2020. The minister conveyed the wish of the Kyrgyz side to host the next games scheduled for 2022 in Kyrgyzstan as part of celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the country's independence (Turkic Council, 18.03.2020).
- According to Tajikistan's Ministry of Industry and New Technologies, the European Union will assist the country in the disposal of tailings with radioactive waste. The financial assistance to be provided in the form of grants will be used to neutralize the Dehmoy and Taboshar tailing dumps in the north of Tajikistan. It is estimated that there are a total of 55 million tons of waste at the country's ten tailings, including 36 million tons at the Dehmoy site (Avesta, 16.03.2020).
- President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov made a working trip to get acquainted with the environmental situation in the Karakum desert and projects related to the conservation of the local flora and fauna. The Turkmen leader instructed government officials to continue, together with international organizations, systematic research work on improving ecological conditions of the desert and combating desertification. He also ordered to intensify efforts to include the Karakum biosphere in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Turkmenistan Golden Age, 17.03.2020).
- The multipurpose laboratory at the Institute of History and Archeology of Turkmenistan's Academy of Sciences started using latest achievements in laser technology, spectroscopy and analytical software for more complete study of the country's archeological heritage. The laboratory is equipped with a laser analyzer that allows to accurately determine the chemical composition of artifacts discovered during recent archeological excavations (TWESCO, 18.03.2020).
- The Institute of Manuscripts of Azerbaijan's National Academy of Sciences conducted research in Uzbekistan within the project of the Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center and discovered valuable ancient manuscripts related to the history of Azerbaijan. In particular, manuscripts of Nizami Ganjavi, Imadeddin Nasimi, Muhammad Fuzuli and other Azerbaijani classics, as well as a collection of works by Shah Ismail Khatai, were identified (TWESCO, 20.03.2020).
- The Committee on Information Policy of Russia's State Duma supported the adoption of amendments to the Code of Administrative Offenses that increase fines and toughen liability for the placement and distribution of information on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances on the Internet. Fines for popularizing drugs on online resources can reach up to 1.5 million rubles (19,425 dollar) for legal entities and up to 30,000 rubles (388 dollar) for individuals (SNG.today, 19.03.2020).