Rahmon Uses Crackdown and Fear to Shore Up His Rule in Tajikistan

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Farhod makes his living driving a taxi in Gharm, a mountainous region of the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan. During the country’s civil war in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the valley formed the principal stronghold of the anti-communist opposition. Farhod lost two of his brothers in the five-year conflict, in which more than 50,000 people died. His leg was amputated after he was wounded fighting government forces. Despite having every reason to hate the current regime of President Emomali Rahmon, who came to power in 1992 soon after the war began, he does not. “President Rahmon is a strong man. He lifted our country out of civil war. I respect him for that,” Farhod told me in the summer of 2013.  
  
In early January, the International Crisis Group published a report that portrayed Tajikistan, the poorest state in Central Asia, as a fragile country on the verge of another civil war. “Plagued by violence, corruption and economic hardship, and exposed to a long, insecure border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan is under dangerous stress,” it warned. “As Tajikistan’s growing fragility impacts a brittle region, the country must become a conflict-prevention priority.” International Crisis Group has been predicting the state’s collapse in Tajikistan for at least 15 years, pointing to its remittance-dependent economy, proximity to Afghanistan and dizzying levels of corruption as factors that will tip the country over the brink. And it has not been alone. Analysts have long been making similar forecasts about Tajikistan as well as its neighbors in Central Asia, portraying the whole region as dangerous and conflict-prone.  
  
Yet despite facing sporadic outbreaks of violence, Tajikistan has been relatively stable, and its government has proved remarkably resilient. And things are likely to stay that way, despite the recent warnings. Sixty-three-year-old Rahmon has ruled the country for almost 24 years, embodying what Sarah Kendzior has referred to as [“the curse of stability in Central Asia,”](http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/19/the-curse-of-stability-in-central-asia/) where authoritarian rulers have held onto power by touting their ability to keep a lid on unrest.  
  
Rahmon has done it with familiar methods. Fear plays an important role in keeping the population in check. Protests are not tolerated. The regime has blocked opposition websites and arrested, assassinated and forced opposition activists into exile—and [targeted them abroad](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/17/tajikistan-severe-crackdown-political-opposition). In elections last March [that were criticized](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-tajikistan-election-idUSKBN0LY10120150302), as ever, by Western observers, the regime’s wartime adversaries and strongest postwar opposition movement, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), lost its only two seats in parliament. Over the summer of 2015, local IRPT deputies began resigning under pressure from the security services.   
  
The Ministry of Justice then [moved to ban the IRPT altogether](http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-demise-of-tajik-islamic-party/27227509.html), citing its lack of popular support as justification. Following armed attacks on police in Dushanbe in September, the government labeled the party a terrorist organization and arrested over 200 of its leading members. According to the International Crisis Group, the demise of the IRPT “undermined the legacy of the 1997 peace deal” and could cause a resumption of hostilities. But that seems unlikely, given the nature of Rahmon’s rule.

*Rahmon’s image and legitimacy are built on his role in ending the brutal civil war in the 1990s.*

Although it uses brutal methods, Rahmon’s regime also governs through a degree of consent—resignation for most, active support for some. One factor separates it from the other governments of Central Asia: Rahmon came to power in 1992 at the height of the civil war.   
  
In their examination of authoritarian durability in Africa, Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky argue that leaders who emerge from violent conflicts usually possess “extraordinary legitimacy and unquestioned authority.” They are more willing to use violence, demand loyalty and often polarize society by dividing people into “friends” and “enemies.” Instead of building a peace centered on liberal notions of democracy and human rights, Rahmon’s government established peace on the principles of authority and stability, [as social scientist John Heathershaw has noted](https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/16792/Heathershaw%20IPK%202007%20preprint.pdf?sequence=2). This peace is built on three foundations: fear of the police and security services; Rahmon’s position as the harbinger of peace; and the population’s fear of a return to violence.  
  
Farhod’s remarks illustrate how Rahmon’s image and legitimacy are built on his role in ending the civil war. He is celebrated in a cult of personality, with posters in praise of him festooning public buildings across Tajikistan. Educational institutions and the state media extol his achievements in bringing peace to the nation. A new museum dedicated to the president is currently being planned, with taxpayers footing the bill. Last month, the Tajik parliament passed a new law declaring Rahmon “leader of the nation” and “originator of peace and national reconciliation.” The new law guarantees legal impunity for Rahmon and his powerful family. And if changes to the constitution pass a referendum that is set for May, which they surely will, the leader of the nation” will be able to stay at the helm indefinitely.   
  
For many Tajiks, politics is synonymous with the chaos, instability and violence that they experienced during the civil war. State media bombard citizens with images of conflict in the Middle East, a warning of what happens when foreign-backed revolutionaries espousing democratic values attempt to seize power. Rahmon frequently reminds people of the dangers of political engagement, declaring that rapid change would lead to another civil war. “Young people should not forget the terrible and tragic days [of the civil war],” he declared in June 2015. “In order to strengthen national unity, all citizens need to adhere to the principles of patriotism,” Rahmon concluded.   
  
For the Tajik government, being patriotic means being loyal to the regime. I spent the summer of 2013 living in Vanj, a mountainous region a few miles from the border with Afghanistan. Although people were happy to talk about family, food and football, when I mentioned that I was a political scientist, the standard response was: “Politics is a dirty thing.” My host explained to me that the Tajik people had their fill of politics in the 1990s. “We value peace over everything else.”   
  
While Rahmon strengthens his position, however, Tajik citizens are dealing with one of the worst economic crises in recent years, and it shows little sign of abating. Over the past few years, remittances sent back from Russia have constituted the equivalent of over half of GDP. But with Russia facing an economic crisis brought on by the slump in global energy prices and international sanctions over its actions in Ukraine, less and less money is being sent back. Remittances to Tajikistan declined 32 percent in the first half of 2015 compared to the previous year. According to a World Bank survey, there was a 7 percent increase in households struggling to buy enough food between May and September last year.  
  
But economic hardships do not directly translate into revolutionary zeal. Even though life is becoming tougher for many Tajiks, the fear of threatening the status quo and genuine reverence for Rahmon keep most from opposing the current government. As Farhod put it, “Life is difficult. But it would be far worse if there were another war.”