

# NATION-BUILDING

## PUBLIC OPINION, DEMOCRACY, AND AUTHORITARIANISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Saodat OLIMOVA

*Ph.D. (Philos.), Director of the SHARQ Research Center,  
Representative of Central Asia and the Caucasus in Tajikistan  
(Dushanbe, Tajikistan)*

Muzaffar OLIMOV

*D.Sc. (Hist.), Coworker at the SHARQ Research Center  
(Dushanbe, Tajikistan)*

### ABSTRACT

**B**ased on Tajikistan's experience, this article examines the evolution of views, values, and preferences of the population of the Central Asian (CA) countries that support the sustainability of their political regimes. Based on public opinion poll results, this article presents the population's preferences regarding the political system, sheds light on its attitude toward state power and its institutions, and gives assessments of the current regime and efficiency of different forms of citizen engagement. It also looks at the ways citizens participate in state

governance and how effectively value judgments are being implemented.

The paper shows that despite the differences in the traditional social institutions of the CA states, as well as in the development paths they have chosen, they are all evolving according to the neopatrimonialism model. However, the evolution of political views in the CA societies shows that democratic values and preferences continue to occupy an important place in the mass consciousness. From this it follows that the government's necessitated support of certain elements of de-

*mocracy is generated not only by its desire to create a façade or its willingness to make concessions to foreign donors and the international community, but also by social pressure. At the same time, the population's political views and preferences are contradicto-*

*ry and fragmented. They form the base for mass support of democracy, on the one hand, and for social consensus regarding restrictions of citizen rights and recognition of the privileges of heads of state, including patrimonial supremacy, on the other.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia, Tajikistan, public opinion, elites, political regimes, political preferences, democracy, neopatrimonialism, elections, values, forms of citizen engagement.*

## *I n t r o d u c t i o n*

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave the West reason to hope for rapid democratization of the independent states that formed on its ruins and rejected the communist ideology. However, democratization has failed to take hold during the two decades of the post-Soviet transit in the CA countries, as well as in many other former republics of the U.S.S.R. Authoritarianism based on the concentration of political, economic, and military power in the hands of the ruling elites has become the norm. All the same, the regimes that have been established in the CA countries have proven quite stable. This stability was achieved not so much from applying forceful measures as by reaching a certain consensus between society and the state.

What has been the basis of this consensus? What popular views, values, and orientations have made it possible for the present-day CA states to survive?

To answer these questions, let us first present a brief review of the transit in the CA countries and, second, describe the political views and preferences of their population.

Although the CA countries have basically developed along the same lines, they are nevertheless quite different now, so this public opinion analysis is based on the experience of one of them. The authors use the empirical data of public opinion polls carried out in Tajikistan by the Sharq Research Center between 1996 and 2013 to write this article.

## **The Formation of Autocracies as a Research Target**

Once they became free of the totalitarian yoke, the Western world expected the post-Soviet nations to build European-style democratic states. There were several reasons for this presumption. The post-Soviet countries (including those in Central Asia) that rejected the planned economy began carrying out democratic and market reforms, establishing new political institutions (the presidency, parliamentarianism, independent courts, plurality, and so on), and engaging in privatization. They also signed the Helsinki Agreements and joined the OSCE and made building democratic, law-based, and social states, conducting market reforms, and engaging in national consolidation their main priorities.

The fact that the statehood of the CA countries sprung from the Soviet Union is making national consolidation just as difficult as democratization and transition to the market.

Before Russian expansion, three feudal monarchies existed in Central Asia: the Kokand Khanate, the Khiva Khanate, and the Bukhara Emirate. Turkic dynasties relied on the Tajik bureaucracy to rule these Islamic states with their multiethnic populations.

In 1924, Russia carried out so-called national delimitation in CA, which was called upon to ultimately destroy local forms of statehood, break the traditional social structures, and create prerequisites for forming new "socialist nations." Soviet modernization led to sweeping social transformations and the creation of new statehood, which resulted in new identities (during the pre-Soviet period, ethnic and civic identities were very underdeveloped and perceptibly deferred to regional, sociocultural, and confessional identities). However, despite all the efforts of Soviet power, the national identity did not dominate (at least in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), although a certain amount of success was nevertheless achieved in this direction. For example, ethnic territories that did not exist before began to slowly form.<sup>1</sup>

National consolidation became a very important problem during national state-building; therefore, both local and foreign researchers exerted great effort to study a broad range of issues relating to their resolution.<sup>2</sup> This problem still needs to be urgently resolved today, which is graphically shown by the deadlock experienced by Central Asian integration, ethnic conflicts, state ethnic ideology, and the transformation of the national identity in every CA state reflected in the censuses.

Studies of the post-Soviet transit appeared along with the large number of publications by Western academics about identity in Central Asia, as well as works by their Central Asian colleagues trying to revise history and create ideological bases for national consolidation in the first decade of independence.<sup>3</sup> Transitology<sup>4</sup> has been most frequently used for analyzing the post-Soviet transit.

Following the idea of rational choice, transitology experts concentrated their attention on agents, politicians (primarily the representatives of political elites), and their priorities, as well as on the development of civil society. But they did not take into account the roles of various factors (structural, economic, and international) and believed that programs for exporting democracy could be created for transit countries.<sup>5</sup> Institutional reform projects and privatization programs were drawn up for this based on the experience of previous transits.

In the 2000s, the West was disappointed in the post-Soviet transit, it also being unexpectedly discovered that the authoritative regimes taking shape were not alike. When searching for the reasons of such mysterious diversity in the authoritarian models, Western researchers turned to ancient times to unlock the secret of the sociocultural development of post-Soviet societies. They were particularly

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to agree with M. Laruelle's statement that by the time the Soviet Union disintegrated the national identity of each of the republics was already clearly established and recognized by its population (see: M. Laruelle, "Vneshniaia politika i identichnost v Tsentralnoi Azii," *Pro et Contra*, Nos. 1-2, January-April 2013, p. 14). Ethnic territories did not begin to form in Central Asia until the beginning of the 1980s. Their lack of formation in the Ferghana Valley continues to feed ethnonational and border conflicts.

<sup>2</sup> See: M. Atkin, "Tajik National Identity," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1993; I. Bashiri, "Tajik Ethnicity in Historical Perspective," 1998, available at [<http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Ethnicity/Ethnic.html>]; S.C. Levi, "Turks and Tajiks in Central Asian History," in: *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, ed. by J. Sahadeo, R. Zanca. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007; S. Abashin, *Natsionalizm v Srednei Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti*, Aleteiyia, St. Petersburg, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> This article is limited to a brief review of Western studies, since a comparison of the transit conceptions of Western researchers and academics from the CA countries requires a separate study.

<sup>4</sup> See: J.J. Linz, A.C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington D.C., 1996; G. O'Donnell, P. Schmitter, L. Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington D.C., 1986.

<sup>5</sup> See: G. Nodia, "The Democratic Path," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13/3, 2002.

interested in zhuzes, clans,<sup>6</sup> traditional social institutions, classes, traditional leadership, and so on. It should be acknowledged that researchers as a rule overestimate the meaning of traditional social structures in the development of the CA countries.

The slow rate of transition to democracy, which was accompanied by such “surprises” as the establishment of “personal dictatorship,” “patronal presidentialism,” “*Sultanism*,” “neopatrimonialism” etc., has forced researchers and analysts to concentrate on studying the factors that hinder democratization and the carrying out of market reforms.

The project to study the political transit and formation of autocratic regimes in CA pursued in 2010-2011 by a group of experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Germany,<sup>7</sup> as well as the works by M. Laruelle on the hybrid nature of neopatrimonial regimes in the Central Asian countries<sup>8</sup> are worth particular mention.

At the same time as the discussions on the hybrid nature of transit regimes, works appeared that examined the place and significance of geopolitical reality during the transit processes. When analyzing how democratization is unfolding in Central Asia, Martha Olcott comes to the conclusion in her rather comprehensive book called *Central Asia's Second Chance* that the failure of democratization is not only a result of the action of the ruling elites, but also of the inaction on the part of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

Since that time an increasing number of researchers have begun examining the development of the CA countries in the context of the so-called New Great Game. They began turning to different approaches in order to advance democracy abroad, as well as to the methods and instruments of external actors (including international organizations). They analyzed the pluses and minuses of the democratization methods, beginning with compulsory and ending with enlightening and convincing.

Works have appeared in recent years that examine the processes leading to autocracy. They include a study written by E. Freedman and R. Shafer<sup>10</sup> that relates the establishment of various authoritarian regimes in the CA countries to development of the media.

M. Omelicheva's<sup>11</sup> works are also interesting, coming to the general conclusion that the results of U.S. and EU efforts to create democratic governments in the CA countries are doomed to failure.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: K. Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2006. The following passage is typical of the Western discussion: “The strong tradition of family or ‘clan’ ties and community structures ... became more important during transition. ... They also contributed to the non-transparent capture of political and economic power by various clans. Appointments to positions of political and economic responsibility tend to be allocated on the basis of trust and patronage, rather than through competitive selection... Power structures are based on a delicate balancing of the allocation of privileges and power between clan structures to maintain political and social stability and the lack of dissent by rival clans. Apart from contributing to political exclusion, this balancing arguably contributes to the inability of economies to benefit from the efficiencies of market systems. It also encourages a preference for economic growth models that guarantee rents (unearned income) and control over rent allocation to people in privileged positions” (UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS, *Beyond Transition. Towards Inclusive Societies*, Regional Human Development Report, Bratislava, 2011, p. 50, available at [<http://europeandcis.undp.org/home/show/BCD10F8F-F203-1EE9-BB28DEE6D70B52E1>]).

<sup>7</sup> See: *Politicheskii protsess v Tsentralnoi Azii: rezultaty, problemy, perspektivy*, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences—Center of Strategic and Political Research, Moscow, 2011; A. Seifert, “Der politische Prozess in Zentralasien und die Systemfrage,” in: *OSZE-Yearbook 2011*, Vol. 17-2011, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, 2013, S. 205-206.

<sup>8</sup> See: M. Laruelle, “Discussing Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Presidentialism in the Central Asian Context,” *Demokratizatsiya*, The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2012, pp. 301-324; M. Laruelle, “Vneshniaia politika i identichnost v Tsentralnoi Azii.”

<sup>9</sup> See: M.B. Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See: *After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*, ed. by E. Freedman, R. Shafer, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> See: M. Omelicheva, “Democracy and Dictatorship in Central Asia in Political Science,” Published online February 2013, available at [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199756223-0060>], 26 November, 2013.

In the context of our topic, particular attention should go to the role that the interaction among society, state institutions, and elites is playing in the establishment of political regimes in the CA countries. While much research has been done on the transformation of state institutions, the game rules formed by elites for the authoritative regimes and for the political orientations and views of the population (which in fact ensured the development of the latter) are still very unclear.

## Elites and Authoritarianism

Researchers admit that so-called clan-bureaucratic capitalism has taken shape in the CA countries, aimed mainly at taking hold of political power as quickly as possible. The groups that came to power used bureaucratic and political power to take control over the key economic resources the government acquired during the collapse of the Soviet Union in the process of privatization of state and collective property. The collaboration between political structures and economic interest groups and military structures not only determined the specifics of the new political elites, but also created a new bourgeoisie within the framework of clan-bureaucratic capitalism.<sup>12</sup> During social stratification, small groups of large property-owners and middle class appeared, as well as a large stratum of poor people.

This stratification, inequality, and social exclusion in CA formed in conditions of state-building, the appearance of new civic identities, and ethnic transformations. This led to the need to review history and create new mythologies in the spirit of ethno-nationalism.

The tempestuous religious revival, particularly of Islam, was a kind of response to what was going on.

The above-mentioned processes are developing in the CA countries at different rates; new political and economic systems are being formed at the regional level in many different ways (explosive and evolutionary, destructive and peaceful).

In hydrocarbon-rich states, such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, natural rent has provided the elites with the opportunity to benefit from privatization and strengthen their supremacy through unofficial institutions and the strong bureaucracy inherited from the Soviet Union.

After consolidating their power, the elites of Kazakhstan chose regulated democracy; first the economy was liberalized and then certain political reforms were carried out.

As for Turkmenistan, it is reminiscent of a typical petroleum monarchy. Its development strategy is based both on receiving income from the sale of oil and gas and on deification of the state leader. Despite the fact that the Constitution of Turkmenistan includes a provision on plurality, there is only one party in the country: the government approves the candidates allowed to participate in elections ahead of time. The media are under state control, while courts are used to carry out political repression of dissidents. There is no freedom of confession, association, or movement in the country.

Uzbekistan's experience is very interesting,<sup>13</sup> where the local Soviet elite (nomenklatura) was much stronger than in the other Central Asian countries. The former capitals of all the three pre-Russian states are found in Uzbekistan—Bukhara, Kokand, and Khiva. At one time, the old elites partially blended into the party Soviet nomenklatura and ensured its stability. During Soviet times, the Uzbek nomenklatura (cotton and gas) was sufficiently wealthy and influential.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See: A. Seifert, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> See: A. Ilkhamov, "Neopatrimonialism, Patronage and Factionalism in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," in: D. Bach, M. Gazi-bo, *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond*, Routledge, 2012, p. 189.

<sup>14</sup> See: E. Trifonov, "Uzbekistan: portret v sredneaziatskom inter'ere," available at [<http://www.index.org.ru/others/trifonov.html>], 12 December, 2013.

After it gained its independence, Uzbekistan chose its own development path, which included creating a secular national state, building a regulated market economy, exercising control over financial, commodity, and human resources, investing the assembly industry, and supervising the activity of religious organizations. What is more, there were plans to exercise strict control over society by joining traditional social institutions (*makhallia*) with the state. The Uzbek elites, which had no trouble dealing with small groups of oppositionists, consolidated and legitimized their power.

Present-day Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state based on a consensus of social and political groups.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are periphery countries that do not have rich hydrocarbon resources, have chosen different development paths.

According to the estimates of Freedom House (2007), Kyrgyzstan is the only “partly free” country in the region, while the others are recognized as “not free” (that is, in these countries the political rights and freedoms of citizens are controlled by the government). Kyrgyzstan’s democratization was largely related to the weakness of the elites and the shortage of resources. In Soviet times, the Kyrgyz nomenklatura was weak and not wealthy, since there was no major industry or high-income agricultural branches in the republic. For this reason, Kyrgyzstan’s Soviet leaders immediately conceded power to the newly born democrats.

The country’s new elite, which did not have enough resources to consolidate its power, asked for international assistance. After receiving Western funding, Kyrgyzstan carried out the most extensive democratic reforms in the region. Due to the fact that democracy was planted in the country under the pressure of donors, foreign partners, and advisors, it was and remains unstable, which is clearly shown by the revolutions (2005 and 2010) and ethnic clashes that broke out between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks on 10-13 June, 2013 in Osh.

In Tajikistan, new state-building began accompanied by armed seizure of power by the regional elites and division of Soviet property, for which there were many reasons. The most important of them was the ideological standoff, one side of which was the Islamic political movement, and the existence of several rival local elites controlled from Moscow.

After the civil war, militarized regional elites came to power that recognized Russia as the sovereign. Tajikistan carried out market reforms a little later than its neighbors and an open economy was created. Real plurality existed in the republic and a constructive and non-constructive opposition functioned, some representatives of which published their own newspapers. The traditional institutions restored their influence at the same time; they helped the country to survive and were pivotal in the full-fledged functioning of its economic, social, and political systems. On the other hand, the traditional social institutions promoted, to a certain extent, the formation of a stricter authoritarian neopatrimonial regime (but in no way all aspects of the evolution of the country’s political regime).

Tajikistan’s experience shows that a tough regime does not necessarily mean a strong state. The power of the traditional patrimonial institutions, fear of war, the departure of a large number of male heads of households to earn money abroad, and limited access to information (because the population does not have electricity for six months of the year) have given Tajikistan’s ruling elite the opportunity to consolidate the country without high expenditures and intensified democratization.

Labor migration had and is continuing to have a strong influence on the country’s social and political life. It is shaking confidence in the responsibility the government, elite, and leaders are taking for their citizens and causing people to doubt the legitimacy of the current authorities.

State policy and migration are having a significant influence on each other. This is changing the areas of traditional responsibility and cutting back on the state’s social services. Households are using the remittances of labor migrants to compensate for the lack of government services, but are not putting pressure on the government to raise the efficiency of its activity. This is making it possible to

reduce state expenditures on public health, education, and social security, while stabilizing the political situation in the country and so retaining poor governance and clearly weak state institutions.

The existing regime concedes a certain level of redistribution and increase in state power, as well as retention of elements of democracy.

The instability of democracy in Kyrgyzstan and of its elements in Tajikistan is largely related to the fact that these countries depend to a certain extent on foreign donors who demand policy adjustments relating to neoliberal governance and adherence to human rights.

Foreign pressure is retaining a certain level of democratization, on the one hand, while it is leading to the privatization of state services, on the other. This is destroying the state service systems, including in education and public health. On the other hand, the independent structures, foreign funds, and NGOs taking over services in education, public health, and social security cannot replace the state.

The other side of such decentralization is fragmentation of the social sphere, which is becoming all the less comprehensive, since reforms are being carried out on the basis of different market models.<sup>15</sup>

The development of a civil society is advancing lobbying, but in no way political competition. This could result in delegitimization of the government and lead to less citizen participation in the activity of the depoliticized state institutions.

A stronger civil society goes hand in hand with weaker political parties. This means that the opposition is frequently moving beyond politics into the sphere of civil society or religion.<sup>16</sup>

A brief review of the development of the CA countries during the transit shows that despite the differences in their traditional social institutions and the different paths they have chosen, things are progressing along the same lines. In so doing, the evolution of the post-Soviet regimes in CA is showing stronger authoritarian trends while preserving formal signs of democracy.<sup>17</sup>

Why is this happening?

There is a variety of objective and subjective reasons for this, which have been analyzed in many works on the post-Soviet transit.<sup>18</sup> However, the most important internal problems of the CA countries include difficulties in forming ruling elites and institutional innovations, as well as the indeterminate and contradictory positions of their societies regarding future development.

### ***Difficulties in Forming the Ruling Elites***

The Central Asian elites, which come from the party-Soviet nomenklatura, are still at the transformation stage and are having difficulty managing the transit.

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<sup>15</sup> See: S. Closson, "State Weakness in Perspective: Strong Politico-Economic Networks in Georgia's Energy Sector," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61/5, 2009, pp. 759-778; B. Christophe, "From Hybrid Regime to Hybrid Capitalism? The Political Economy of Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze," in: *Potentials of Disorder*, ed. by J. Koehler, C. Zürcher, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> See: I. Ohayon, S. Serrano, "The Post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia: Another South?" in: *Back to the South? Sovereignty and Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Paris, 2014, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> See: M. Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., 2003.

<sup>18</sup> A. Fisun, *Demokratiia, neopatrionalizm i globalnye transformatsii*, Konstanta, Kharkov, 2006; M. Laruelle, "Vneshniaia politika i identichnost v Tsentralnoi Azii."

### ***Institutional Difficulties of the Transit***

During the transit, old state and social institutions were discredited and abolished. At the same time, social stratification led to fragmentation and politicization of society in the CA states; new rich and poor strata appeared, statuses intermingled, and the social capital accumulated by different groups of the population became depreciated. The unsuccessful attempts to import Western mechanisms for regulating the social processes led to stronger influence of the old social institutions (particularly unofficial ones). Systems gradually formed that united official and unofficial institutions and practices; as a barrier of vertical mobility, they developed strictly defined rules of the game.

At present, society in all the CA states depends to one extent or another on paternal structures with their inherent management methods; they are social pyramids headed by strong individuals. In each of the countries, these pyramids consist not of individual players (such as political parties, businessmen, trade unions, and so on), but of several subnational subsystems<sup>19</sup> that might be different in character (local, branch, or ethnic) and incorporate both new democratic institutions and organized crime.

In turn, subnational subsystems are in difficult and often conflict-prone relations. The entire structure is managed using hierarchal ties based on traditional institutions, loyalty, and material interests. This kind of system of relations legitimizes the current government, but prevents the development of a free market and the creation of independent civil and political institutions in society.

Further democratization implies dismantling the transition structures that have developed, which could lead to destabilization of the CA countries. This is where the contradiction among the existing conceptions of their democratization lies. Whereas the action of the Central Asian elites is based on convictions about the need to “approach democracy through stabilization,” Western democrats are coming from the opposite side (they think that stabilization is achieved through democratization). In other words, while the ruling elites of Central Asia are willing to sacrifice democracy for the sake of preserving their power, Western politicians are calling for realizing democratic ideals by sacrificing stability.<sup>20</sup>

## **Hybridism and Fragmentation of Views on the Relations between the State and Society**

There is a wide range of views on the role of the state. However, an opinion prevails in the CA countries that democratization and reform as a whole are only possible when the state plays a key role in these processes. Broad public consensus on this issue is easing the development of patrimonialism and is making it possible to for the state to put greater pressure on society year after year and interfere in the private lives of its citizens.

### ***Political Views and Preferences of Society***

In order to understand the nature of the Central Asian regimes, it would be worth taking a look at the political views and orientations of society over time.

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<sup>19</sup> See: “Transformatsiia v Tsentralnoi Azii: stolknovenie protivopolozhnykh kontseptsii?” available at [<http://www.postsoviet.ru/print.php?pid=88>], 19 December, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

The public opinion monitoring carried out in Tajikistan between 1996 and 2013 shows that society has largely been liberated from the influence of extremely leftist ideologies (including communist). At the same time, the number of liberals has significantly shrunk<sup>21</sup>; extreme right-wing ideologies have not become widespread either. On the whole, society's orientations vary widely within the centrist non-liberal range, whereby interest in politics and the level of participation in it have dropped.

In 2013, the respondents interested in politics to one extent or another constituted only 39.3%; 56% said they were not interested in politics. In 1996, 42% of the respondents constantly followed the political situation, 33% followed it now and then, while 22% were not interested at all.

As for political views, two major groups can be singled out among the respondents in Tajikistan, as in the other CA countries. One of them supports democracy, which presumes the existence of a parliament and holding free and fair elections. The other believes that the most suitable form of rule is an authoritarian state headed by a strong leader/"sultan," while the parliament and elections should at best play an instrumental or decorative role.

There is also a third group, which is becoming increasingly larger. The matter concerns disillusioned sociopolitical marginals who are indifferent about the political structure of their country and feel they have little influence on the situation.

The polls show that during the years of independence, the population of Tajikistan has been unable to overcome the fragmentation and inconsistency of its political views. Moreover, the number of supporters of democracy has perceptibly dropped, although they continue to comprise the largest group.

When analyzing the public opinion polls for 1996, S. Wagner noted that support for democracy in Tajikistan has no analogy in CA. He presumed that the popularity of democratic ideas was not related to support of a pro-democratic government, rather it was more of a spontaneous nature that did not depend on the existing government.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, over the past 17 years, the number of supporters of democratic ideas has perceptibly increased. While in 1996, 79% of the respondents upheld democratic and pro-democratic views,<sup>23</sup> in 2010, their number dropped to 63%, and in 2013 to 57.7%.

The percentage of convicted anti-democrats remained essentially the same: in both 1996 and 2013, it amounted to 14%.

Over the past years, there are fewer "confused" people, i.e. those who are poorly informed and cannot determine their political views. It should be noted that in 1996, this group, mainly consisting of women, was the largest; 33% of the polled belonged to it.<sup>24</sup> In 2013, the number of "confused," the majority of whom were still women, had dropped to a little more than 7%.

By 2013, this group was replaced by "disillusioned" sociopolitical marginals who believe that "the form of government does not matter for the likes of them" since their opinion is not important anyway. In the 2013 poll, they amounted to around 25% of the respondents.

### **Preferred Political System**

In order to shed light on what the population of Tajikistan thinks about the preferred political system, we asked a series of questions about the extent to which a parliamentary form of rule, dicta-

<sup>21</sup> 16% in 1996 (see: S. Wagner, "Public Opinion in Tajikistan," in: *Voices of the Electorate Series*, Washington, 1997, p. 4).

<sup>22</sup> See: *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> See: *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> See: *Ibid.*, p. 3. It should be kept in mind, that some of the pro-democratic respondents were part of this group, who responded most frequently with "I am undecided" to questions about political orientations and preferred political system.

torship, theocracy, or military rule would be suitable for Tajikistan. The questions we asked did not call for choosing one of the four systems of government. We were more interested in evaluating the extent to which the people accepted, approved, or rejected a particular political system. The responses confirmed the conclusion that the political consciousness of Tajikistan's population is fragmented and inconsistent and that the personal factor prevails over the institutional. Many respondents thought that both a parliamentary system and the rule of a strong leader were best suited to Tajikistan.

Nevertheless, despite the stronger authoritative trends, the most acceptable political system for the population of Tajikistan is still the parliamentary form of rule with general, honest, and transparent elections. A total of 41.9% of the respondents believe this system is good, 35.7% think it is probably good, and only 16.6% think it is unsuitable or not very suitable for the country.

A total of 31.4% of the respondents are supporters of an authoritarian system or dictatorship. They note that the rule of a strong leader without a parliament or elections is a very good form of governance for Tajikistan, while 24.3% think it is probably good. In so doing, almost half of the respondents think that this system is unsuitable or not very suitable for Tajikistan.

Quite a lot of people think a group of religious leaders who would take charge of all political and legislative issues would be a good form of rule: 11.8% think this would be very good for Tajikistan, while 31.5% think it would probably be good.

A form of rule in which the state is run directly by the military is the least popular: 6.1% of the respondents considered it very good, while 21.8% said it would probably be good (see Table 1).

Table 1

**Preferred Political Systems,  
% of cases (2013, N = 2,000)**

No.		Very Good	Probably Good	Probably Bad	Very Bad	Undecided/ Refuse to Answer	Total
1	Rule of a strong leader without parliament or elections	31.4	24.3	27.4	14.7	2.2	100.0
2	Military rule	6.1	21.8	30.8	35.4	5.9	100.0
3	Rule of a parliament that makes decisions about state policy and is elected on the basis of regular elections	41.9	35.7	12.9	3.7	5.8	100.0
4	Rule of a group of religious leaders who are responsible for all political and legislative issues	11.8	31.5	34.4	16.8	5.4	100.0

The respondents' responses reflected both inclinations toward democratization and their recognition of the possibility to limit citizens' political and other rights in order to maintain public order. For example, 87.9% agreed with the need for the indicated limitations, a little more than 9% were against, and the other 2.6% had no opinion.

### What is Democracy Tajik-Style?

The contradiction in the political views and orientations of the Tajik population seen in the responses to the public opinion polls make one wonder what the country's residents actually believe democracy to be. The polls of 1996, 2004, and 2010 held with the support of the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES) show that in these fifteen years ideas about democracy have not changed much, which apparently indicates their stable nature.

A total of 61% of the respondents mainly associate democracy with human rights, 55% with the freedom of religion, and 53% with freedom of speech. Only a small number of respondents mentioned its institutional support. No one pointed out citizen obligations or the rights of minorities, only 38% of respondents mentioned freedom of choice, 26% freedom of association, and 13% division of power and the system of checks and balances (see Table 2).

Table 2

**What is Democracy?  
(2010, N = 1,500)**

Definition of Democracy	% of cases
Human rights	61
Freedom of religion	55
Freedom of speech	53
Freedom of choice	38
Total employment	37
State support of pensioners	32
Honest bureaucrats	29
State support of vulnerable groups of the population	28
Freedom of association	26
Satisfactory and comprehensive observance of the law	24
Equal access to education	17
System of checks and balances in the power system	13

### Rating of Value Judgments in the Mass Consciousness and How to Implement Them

In order to better understand the political orientation of the Tajik population, we compared the ideas of the respondents about "how things should be" (value judgments) with how these "shoulds" are being implemented in real life.

The most important value judgments on the list were as follows:

- (1) Economic prosperity (97.8% of the respondents).
- (2) Freedom of religious convictions (96.6%).

(3) Law and independent court: “a judicial system that judges everyone equally” (96%).

(4) Prospects for young people: “opportunity for young people to find work” (91.4%).

Freedom of speech, fair elections, and civilian control over the military proved to be in the background (see Table 3).

Table 3

**Rating of Sociopolitical Value Judgments,  
% of cases (2013, N = 2,000)**

No.	How Important Is It for You to Live in a Country Where:	Very Important	Probably Important	Probably not Important	Not Important at All	Undecided/ Refuse to Answer	Total
1	Economic prosperity has been reached	71.3	26.5	1.9	0.2	0.1	100.0
2	Religious convictions can be freely confessed	68.9	27.7	3.0	0.1	0.2	100.0
3	Young people have good opportunities for finding a job	74.1	24.0	1.4	0.5	0	100.0
4	The judicial system judges everyone equally	71.0	25.0	3.1	0.7	0.2	100.0
5	People can openly express their thoughts and discuss state affairs	54.5	36.9	8.1	0.4	0.1	100.0
6	There are no restrictions on the media	56.0	36.2	6.7	0.3	0.7	100.0
7	Fair elections in which at least two political parties participate are regularly held	50.0	40.5	8.3	0.6	0.6	100.0
8	The military is controlled by civilian leaders	39.1	46.2	9.0	2.2	0.2	100.0

Assessment of how efficiently these values are being put into practice in present-day Tajikistan shows that only the level of religious freedom most satisfies public hopes (93.8% of the respondents assessed the situation with freedom of religion as good and very good). A perceptibly smaller number of respondents assessed the situation with elections and freedom of speech as good (50.3% and 49.6%, respectively). The highest dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to the state of the judicial system (only 27.4% considered it good) and the economy (33.9%).

The respondents were not satisfied at all with the prospects for young people; only 11.8% of those polled think that they have a good chance of finding a job in Tajikistan (see Table 4).

Table 4

**Assessment of the Implementation of  
Value Judgments in Present-Day Tajikistan,  
% of cases (2013, N = 2,000)**

No.	Value Judgments	Very Good	Probably Good	Not very Good	Very Bad	Undecided/ Refuse to Answer	Total
1	People can openly express their views and discuss state affairs	10.2	39.4	42.2	6.1	1.7	100.0
2	Fair elections in which at least two political parties participate are regularly held	9.7	40.6	34.7	10.5	4.3	100.0
3	The judicial system judges everyone equally	6.1	21.3	48.3	21.8	2.5	100.0
4	The military is controlled by civilian leaders	14.6	48.1	25	7.1	5	100.0
5	There are no restrictions on the media	9.6	40	39.5	9.6	1	100.0
6	Religious convictions can be freely confessed	54.5	39.3	4.9	1.1	0.2	100.0
7	Economic prosperity has been reached	12.7	21.2	45.4	19.8	0.9	100.0
8	Young people have good opportunities for finding a job	4.1	7.9	46.3	41.5	0.2	100.0

Tables 3 and 4 show a lack of correspondence between the perception of values, including democratic, and their implementation in real political and social practice. On the one hand, democratic values are still quite popular, while on the other, in the context of lack of prospects for young people, unfair courts, and the difficult economic position of the population, their “nominal” implementation does not seem like such a bad thing.

Nevertheless, the Tajik population positively assesses the political situation in the country and is looking optimistically to the future. For example, 73.1% of the respondents noted that the political situation has improved over the past year, 21.8% believe that it has not changed, 3.3% are certain that it has become worse, and 1.8% are undecided. These data correlate with the ideas about how Tajikistan is developing as a whole: 82.7% of the polled think that “the country is moving in the right direction,” 11.2% believe it is going in the wrong direction, and 6% are undecided.

It appears that the positive assessments of the political situation and development of the country are largely related to the high economic growth seen in the past 15 years,<sup>25</sup> as well as to the improvement in the prosperity of households in 2012. When answering the question about the financial state of their households, 56.5% of the respondents said that it had improved in the past year (2012), 33.5% noted that it had remained the same, and 10% said it had deteriorated.

### ***Attitude toward Elections***<sup>26</sup>

Over the past decades, the Tajik population's positive attitude toward elections has increased. A total of 73% believe that voting at elections makes it possible for ordinary citizens to have an influence on the decisions made in the country (in 1996, 64% of the respondents were of this opinion); 24% (26% in 1996) do not agree with this statement, and 3% (10% in 1996) are undecided.

When expounding on how acceptable elections are for building an ideal model of political system in Tajikistan, 62.9% of the respondents noted that holding them corresponds to one extent or another with local traditions and the political culture, so could be successfully implemented.

A total of 25.6% of the polled believe that elections do not entirely correspond to local traditions and culture, which could easily make them a parody of democracy.

In turn, 6.4% are categorically against elections, believing that they do not correspond to local traditions and cannot be realistically implemented in Tajikistan.

Despite the largely positive attitude of Tajikistan residents to elections, the level of expectations about the fairness of the real electoral process is not very high. Only 25% of the polled expects that elections will be fair, while 40% think they will be to some extent fair; however, despite the existing doubts, most of the respondents believe participation in them to be their civic duty.

In the West, the Internet and media are important factors influencing voters' choice and supporting political competition. In Tajikistan, on the other hand, access to sources of information is extremely limited; this often plays a greater role than the state's prohibitory measures. The following examples are sufficient to shed light on the situation: only 29% of households have satellite antennas, while only 5% have a working Internet.

Only 15% of the respondents periodically used the Internet (at home, at work, or from their cell phone) during the six months before the poll was conducted. It should be noted that the development of such new technology as the Internet and mobile communication (83% of the respondents have cell phones) will increase access to information, particularly for young people.

### ***Attitude toward the Government and Political Institutions***

The overwhelming majority of respondents feel extremely kindly toward the government (as an institution in general and toward the individuals who personify its structures, in particular). The Tajik population particularly appreciates the country's president Emomali Rakhmon; 94% of the respondents have a positive attitude toward him, and only 4.9% have a negative attitude, while 1.1% did not answer this question.

<sup>25</sup> In 2000-2008, Tajikistan's economy grew at a rate of approximately 8% every year. After the crisis, the growth rates dropped to 3.4% in 2009, but then recovered to almost the precrisis values. In 2012 and 2013, economic growth amounted to 7.5% (see: [<http://www.worldbank.org/ru/country/tajikistan>], 31 January, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Questions about attitude toward political parties and the opposition, as well as about the Tajik population's political preferences were not included in this analysis since they require separate examination.

Public opinion is a little more critical toward the national government in general: 82% have a positive attitude, 14.6% are negative, and 3% did not answer.

The armed forces and law-enforcement structures arouse an even more negative attitude: 67% of the respondents are positive about them, while 30.9% (almost one third) are negative.

As for religious leaders and the media (such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines), 83.5% and 64.3% of the respondents have a positive attitude toward them, respectively.

### ***Assessment of Government Activity***

A total of 76.8% of the respondents positively assess the activity of the Tajik government in general and with respect to economic prosperity and ensuring stability in the country, in particular; 66.2% of citizens support the statement that “the Tajik leadership is creating conditions for the country’s development,” while 53.1% share the opinion that the government is fighting corruption (see Table 5).

Table 5

**Assessment of Government Activity,  
% of cases (2010, N = 1,000)**

	In complete Agreement	Largely Agree	Largely Do Not Agree	In Complete Disagreement	Undecided	Refuse to Answer
The Tajik government is protecting the economic prosperity of its citizens and supporting stability in the country	24.1	52.7	15.2	5.4	2.0	0.6
The Tajik leadership is creating every condition for developing our state	22.4	43.8	26.0	5.7	2.1	0.9
The Tajik government is fighting corruption in our country	15.3	37.8	31.8	8.0	7.0	0.3

### ***Assessment of the Political Regime in Tajikistan and Mechanisms of Political Participation***

When describing the existing political system, 26.8% of the respondents indicated that Tajikistan is an entirely democratic state, while 47.8% thought that it was probably democratic. At the same time, 44% (compared to 14.1% in 1996) think that Tajikistan is a non-democratic state.

The large percentage of those who refused to respond or were undecided draws attention to itself; it amounted to 11.1% (compared to 19% in 1996).

A comparison of the data for the 1996 and 2013 polls shows that the number of people who think that Tajikistan is to some extent a democratic state has increased from 37% to 74.6%.

This makes one wonder not only about how the existing regime is evolving and what the people think about democracy in Tajikistan, but also about the mechanisms of citizen participation in the

country's political life. In order to identify these mechanisms, the respondents were asked questions regarding the opportunities of ordinary citizens to influence the government, as well as the forms and efficiency of their engagement (see Table 6).

Table 6

**Opinion of Ordinary Citizens about  
the Opportunity to Influence the Government and  
Governance in Tajikistan,  
% of the number of respondents  
(2010, N = 1,500)**

Possible Responses	
They have sufficient opportunities	29.0
They probably have opportunities	51.0
They probably do not have opportunities	10.5
They do not have opportunities	4.3
Undecided	5.0
Refuse to answer	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

According to the data of Table 6, 80% of the respondents think that Tajik citizens have some opportunity to influence the government and governance of the country, while according to 20% of the polled, there are no such opportunities.

During the 2013 poll, the respondents were asked what they had done in the last twelve months to resolve the political problems concerning society. The polled stated the following: 43% had discussed political issues with friends and neighbors; 41% had discussed them in their family; 18% had discussed them at meetings (official, party, NGO, community, etc.), 33% had addressed the head of the *avlod/makhallia*, 14% had addressed different levels of government representatives, while 8% had participated in the election campaign of a deputy or party they supported.

As we know, the political participation of citizens is ensured by formal democratic institutions (participation in the election campaign, direct appeal to the government, open discussions at meetings, and so on). However, along with them, informal and traditional institutions that are much more popular among the population are used—kindred groups (*avlod*), neighbor communities (*makhallia*), and other community and kinship networks.

For example, 33% of the Tajik population appealed to the leader of a neighbor or kindred community in the twelve months before the poll, whereby half of them discussed political issues before this with friends, relatives, and neighbors.

It should be noted that informal and traditional institutions that represent a substratum of the local authorities are the most influential in rural areas where more than 73% of the Tajik population lives. They are the second most influential state power structure after the Tajik president and actively participate in governing society and the country.

According to the data of the Society and Islam poll held in 2010, the president of Tajikistan holds first place among those figures who are having the most influence on citizen life; this is what 43.7% think. Second place, with 11% of the votes, goes to the local authorities; the other state structures do not have a significant influence on the life of ordinary citizens.

Many researchers indicate the close cooperation between formal political institutions and traditional informal structures as a special feature of the political organization of society in Tajikistan.<sup>27</sup> For example, when analyzing the activity of the local power structures of Southern Tajikistan, H. Boboyorov notes that they are a political organization of social order acting in the local context and reflecting coherent interaction among various entities through historically and culturally related structures/government and governance networks.<sup>28</sup>

All decisions are made by means of negotiations between state institutions and key actors, such as heads of clans, authoritative religious leaders, influential businessmen, NGO representatives, and so on. A very important role in the country's political life is played by mediation and strict adherence to the current rules of the game. According to the poll data, 44.2% of the respondents think the heads/elders of families/clans/*avlods* are the most influential people in Tajik society.

Cooperation between formal political institutions and traditional informal structures is based on patron-clientele networks that, encompassing rural communities, reach the highest levels of state governance and form the base for neopatrimonialism.

The existence of extremely influential informal institutions in Tajikistan explains the low level of protest activity of the country's population. During the poll held in 2013, 30.2% of the respondents said that peaceful demonstrations/protest campaigns were the most efficient tool for achieving political goals, but only 6.6% expressed a willingness to participate in them; 15.2% thought it might be possible, and 20.7% thought it unlikely. A total of 52% of the polled said that they would not participate in protest campaigns under any circumstances, 1.8% refused to respond, and 3.8% were undecided.

Table 7

**Efficiency of Types of Citizen Engagement  
in Tajikistan,  
% of cases (2013, N = 2,000)**

	Highly Effective	Quite Effective	Quite Ineffective	Absolutely Ineffective	Undecided/ Refuse to Answer
Participation in elections	43.6	34.8	11.0	8.8	1.7
Letters, petitions to the government	28.8	41.5	18.9	9.0	1.8
Statements in the media	22.5	38.6	23.6	12.6	2.7
Posting opinions and assessments on the Internet	10.2	23.0	28.2	26.3	12.2
Participation in peaceful demonstrations/protest campaigns	10.2	20.0	26.2	36.5	7.2

<sup>27</sup> See: B. Hierman, "What Use was the Election to Us? Clientelism and Political Trust amongst Ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 38 (2), 2010; İ. Tunçer-Kılavuz, "Political and Social Networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: 'Clan', Region and Beyond," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2009; A. Seifert, op.cit.

<sup>28</sup> See: H. Boboyorov, "The Role of Collective Identities in Shaping Local Governance Institutions in Southern Khatlon of Tajikistan," in: *ESCAS XI Conference 2009 on "Studying Central Asia: In Quest for New Paths and Concepts?"* Budapest, Hungary, 2009.

As for other forms of citizen participation, attention is drawn to the low evaluation of the possibilities of the Internet; only 33.2% of the polled thought it was effective.<sup>29</sup>

The most widespread forms of citizen engagement are participating in elections (78.4% of the respondents), writing letters and petitions to the government (70.3%), and making statements in the media (61.1%) (see Table 7).

So, on the one hand, the poll data confirm the positive attitude of the Tajik population to such forms of citizen engagement as elections, the right to send letters to the government (individual and collective), and use of the media, while, on the other, they show that a large number of people find participation in peaceful demonstrations and protest campaigns unacceptable.

It can be presumed that these data in no way show social apathy or non-acceptance of collective forms of struggle, but are a reflection of the strategies of political participation that have formed.

Only serious infringement of citizen rights and economic difficulties could lead to spontaneous protests; the population of Tajikistan prefers to resolve all other political problems peacefully with the use of formal democratic institutions and procedures (with the leading role played by informal institutions and practices) (see Table 8).

Table 8

**Reasons for Protest Campaigns  
(2013, N = 2,000)**

Which of the Listed Reasons might Cause You to Participate in Demonstrations/Protest Campaigns?	% of cases
Violation of human rights	51.5
Economic problems	45.9
Corruption and nepotism	38.1
Electricity shortage	37.0
Restrictions on religious freedom	32.8
Unfair elections	22.6
Insufficient political freedoms	17.0
Restricted access to the Internet	12.0

## Conclusion

The inverse development of the post-Soviet political systems in Central Asia has led to the establishment of patrimonial supremacy based not on traditional and/or ideological motives for the actors' behavior, but on material rent-oriented stimuli.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, the personal regimes in CA are hybrid in nature; they unite the logic of patrimonialism and legitimacy of legal-rational bureaucratic power, which is very well noted in the works of M. Laruelle.<sup>31</sup>

The political regimes in CA are sufficiently stable. Their stability is based on a consensus between society and the state ensured both by economic factors, the strength of client-paternal networks,

<sup>29</sup> No electricity and access to the Internet.

<sup>30</sup> See: A. Seifert, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>31</sup> See: M. Laruelle, "Discussing Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Presidentialism in the Central Asian Context."

and the absence of circulating migrants (who are the most politically active part of society), and by the political convictions, values, and preferences of citizens.

Using Tajikistan as an example, we can see that despite the formation of neopatrimonialism, the democratic values and orientations of citizens have been significantly retained. Government support of particular elements of democracy is generated not so much by necessitated concessions to foreign donors or the international community, as by social pressure.

On the other hand, the political views and preferences of society are fragmented, inconsistent, and full of contradictions. Poll data show that along with the Tajik population's mass support of the course toward democracy, there is public consensus about recognizing the right of the leaders to patrimonial supremacy.

Thus, a large part of the population supports *Sultanism*, which it considers to be a guarantor of peace and stability. Population groups that do not accept this form of rule are in blatant or latent opposition to the regime. At the same time, "sterilization" of the oppositionist forces is pushing their representatives into the religious sphere, NGOs, journalism, or the cultural sphere.

A study of public opinion also shows that, despite the end of the transit period, the political regimes are continuing to develop. In this regard, how CA's political development will progress is acquiring particular urgency.

When analyzing the course of the reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Adam Przeworski pointed to the possibility of rejecting democratization or the development of cyclical reform. He noted that the side who wins the transitional conflict will prefer to introduce elements of democracy, but in no way a dictatorship, in order to avoid the outcomes of a forceful solution and to retain control over politics without the use of corresponding institutions.

He wrote the following in particular: "The most likely path is one of radical programs that are eventually slowed or partly reversed, initiated again in a more gradual form with less popular confidence, and again slowed or reversed, until a new government comes in and promises a clean break, and the cycle starts again."<sup>32</sup>

Examining the dynamics of the evolution of the political regimes in CA from this viewpoint, it can be presumed that the current toughening of authoritarianism is a transitory phenomenon. The public opinion poll data in Tajikistan show that the state's interference in the economy and private life of citizens is constantly rising. For example, whereas in 1996 almost 50% of the polled said that no state structures influenced their lives, in 2010, this number amounted to 29.4% and in 2013 to 25%.

This trend will go on until the traditional institutions fed by the migrant economy and interacting with the patron-clientele networks and local authorities stop supporting the consensus between society and the government and so ensure stability of the political regime in Tajikistan.

In the event of "external shocks" caused by an unfavorable foreign political and/or economic situation, a neopatrimonial regime could encounter serious difficulties relating to the impossibility of fulfilling its obligations to society, which threatens a possible aggravation of the transformation conflict.

The sterilization of the secular oppositional forces that took place during functioning of the clientele-patron neopatrimonial system established in Tajikistan led to the Islamic political movement becoming the only real opposition force in the country. In this respect, it is highly likely that further democratization in Tajikistan will be related to Islam.

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<sup>32</sup> A. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 179.