

THE 2013 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: LEGITIMACY AND THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL PARTY OF TAJIKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The author looks at the problem of the legitimacy of the 2013 presidential election in Tajikistan as a *sine qua non* of social and political stability and, consequently, of the country's security and territorial integrity. In Tajikistan's specific case, the election could only be legitimate if the opposition forces, primarily the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRP), which comes second after the institution of presidential power as the most influential political force, did not boycott it.

Despite the easily predicted results (another term for President Rakhmon), the IRP leaders decided to take part in the process: an Islamic revival could only take place in a politically stable Tajikistan. To gain public legitimacy for their decision, they organized a series of consultations with representatives of the public to formulate and

realize the idea of an Alliance of the Reformist Forces of Tajikistan (ORST), which nominated human rights activist Oinihol Bobonazarova as its joint presidential candidate. She did not run because, after failing to present the necessary number of signatures gathered in her support to the Central Election Commission, she was not registered as a candidate. The IRP leaders abstained from voting, but denied all accusations of boycotting the election.

President Rakhmon, who won the election, and the IRP, which stuck resolutely to its course and was able to keep the Islamic revival going, were both winners. The country benefited the most—the election did not shake the frail stability, while Tajikistan's enemies lost another chance to interfere in its domestic affairs with destructive intentions.

KEYWORDS: *Tajikistan, presidential election, the president, parties, the opposition, Islamic revival, Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan.*

Introduction

The 2013 presidential election was devoid of all intrigue: everyone knew that the incumbent would be re-elected for another term.

This was ensured by the votes of the generation that, after surviving the Soviet Union's disintegration, total collapse, and a civil war, remains dominant in the republic's political, economic, and

social life. These people value political stability, economic growth, conditions for self-realization, the opportunity to enjoy greater freedom than in some of the other neighboring post-Soviet republics, free access to the world, etc. more than anything else. These values are still associated (at least partially) with President Rakhmon.

During the country's twenty-two years of independence, a new generation with no painful experience caused by the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. and the hardships that accompanied the development of statehood and the market economy has come to the fore. The younger people, therefore, do not treat political and economic stability as an obvious and important value. The post-Soviet generation (those born in the 1980s and later) believes that stability limits their political, economic, and other ambitions.

In 2013, the new generation outnumbered the older people. On 23 May, 2013, the head of state deemed it necessary to stress at a meeting with young people that 70 percent of the republic's population were barely over 30; those between 14 and 30 comprised 34 percent, while the average age of the country's population was 25.¹

Despite its numerical domination, the post-Soviet generation has not developed into a dominant social group. The youth does not side with the opposition, which mainly belongs to the previous generations; the younger people do not have their own political leaders or activists and functionaries. This explains why they did not and could not play an important role in the election campaign.

Elections as a Conflict Trigger

In Tajikistan, the presidential election, a key political event in any country, were devoid of intrigue and consequence because a large part of its population supported Rakhmon as the future president; the traditional opposition was too small to compete with the acting head of state, while the post-Soviet generation remained passive. The two main questions were whether or not the opposition parties would refuse to accept the election results and whether or not the election would be recognized as legitimate in the country and abroad.

In countries where modern election procedures are a natural product of their economic, political, social, and cultural development, they serve as a problem-solving tool. In countries where these procedures are not accompanied by political and constitutional progress, they degenerate into their opposite; they may cause tension or even trigger sharp conflicts.

The opposition and the West habitually shift the blame onto the regime and quite rightly point to violations of the election law, falsifications, and other "sins," which could trigger a conflict. These methods are especially handy in cases when the opposition could have counted on success. On the other hand, this can be used to ignite massive public protests which almost always go beyond the constitutional framework.

Other factors, such as widespread popular discontent with the people at the top and the readiness of influential forces and groups in the ruling elite to support the opposition, make conflicts practically inevitable. Election results that the opposition refuses to accept as legitimate are the first step along this bumpy road. This happened in Georgia after the parliamentary elections of November 2003, in Ukraine after the presidential election of 2004, and in Kyrgyzstan after the parliamentary elections in February-March 2005.

In some cases, the opposition, fully aware of its inevitable defeat at an election (referendum), ignores it to later dismiss the results as illegitimate. Fanned from abroad, the tension promptly degen-

¹ See: *Asia Plus*, Information bulletin, 24 May, 2013, available at [<http://news.tj/ru/node/145777>], 12 December, 2013.

erates into a crisis spearheaded against the regime. This happened in Egypt after the December 2012 referendum on the new constitution.

Peace and stability are inevitably destroyed. The events triggered by the 2003 parliamentary elections in Georgia led to a 5-day war that cost the country its territorial integrity. In November 2004, the presidential election in Ukraine developed into "Maidan," which split the country and pushed it into a never-ending political and economic crisis. The opposition, which refused to accept the results of the February-March 2005 parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, pushed the country into the abyss of the Tulip Revolution that removed the Akaev regime. The country found itself in a quagmire of political instability and rivalry between the central and regional authorities.

Egypt has offered the most typical example of the developments of this kind. Late in November 2012, the leaders of the opposition National Salvation Front (NSF), which under different pretexts refused to take part in the preparations for the referendum on the new constitution, called on its supporters to boycott it. A large part of the country's voting population came to the polls on 15 and 22 December, 2012 (the dates of the referendum's two stages). The NSF leaders dismissed the results of the public vote and the Constitution (approved by 74 percent of voters) as illegitimate. They brought their supporters out onto Cairo's At Tahrir Square to demand the removal of legally elected President Mohammed Morsi. State offices were attacked by crowds armed with stones and fire-bombs.

Defense Minister of Egypt Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, posing as a guarantor of the country's integrity, called this confrontation a step toward disintegration. Supported from abroad, the opposition was building up tension; the Egyptian military came into play: on 3 July, 2013, they removed democratically elected Morsi from power and, some time later, arrested him.

For the first time in over 200 years, the country found itself on the threshold of a civil war.

Elections as a Conflict Trigger: The Tajik Experience

Tajikistan has had its share of post-election troubles. By the time it acquired its independence, the republic was divided; it was expected that the first democratic presidential elections of 24 November, 1991 would bridge the gap. The results proved to be different.

Former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan Rakhmon Nabiev won the first presidential election with a huge margin. Under the pressure of the opposition and the new rulers of Russia, he had to leave the post of speaker of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan (which he had held from 23 September to 7 October, 1991) until the presidential election. Formally, the opponents of the first democratically elected president of Tajikistan agreed with the voting results, but later developments proved the opposite.

Those who refused to accept the results took schoolchildren of one the Dushanbe schools hostages and announced that they were prepared to take up arms.

On 23 March, 1992, the conflict developed into street riots and anti- and pro-government demonstrations that went on for many weeks. In May, the street riots developed into armed clashes and, later, into a full-scale civil war.

By late 1992, the country was de facto disunited and came close to losing its statehood. A peace agreement that ended the confrontation was signed on 27 June, 1997 after five years of civil war and numerous rounds of talks. It took the country 15 more years to implement the post-conflict agreements and programs and restore the republic's political and legal space; sometimes disagreements were resolved with the use of arms. The well-known events in Khorugh in the summer of 2012 ac-

accompanied by bouts of fighting between the law and order structures and illegal armed groups were the final act that completed restoration of uncontested sovereignty across the republic.

Tajikistan's neighbors are far from friendly; not all of them have accepted the fact that there is a legal Islamic political party in the country, which shows that the republic is gradually restoring its ties with the Islamic world. Its openness to the world, rather than to parts of it, also causes displeasure in certain capitals, as well as its multivectoral foreign policy. It should be said that Tajikistan treats integration projects that might deprive it of part of its sovereignty with a great deal of caution.

To survive in these unfavorable conditions, Tajikistan should not give external forces any chance to put pressure on it, let alone allow them to directly meddle in its domestic affairs. Refusal by external forces to accept the results of presidential and parliamentary elections in any country that has become an object of their scrutiny may lead to pressure or even direct interference, while its authorities might be dismissed as illegal.

The Opposition and the Government in the Political Process

In Tajikistan, the decision to accept or reject the results of parliamentary or presidential elections is directly related to whether the parties that call themselves oppositional and accepted by the government as operating in the constitutional field take part in the process. Today, there are two such parties—the IRP and the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT), the leaders of which sit in the parliament.

The IRP is the second, after the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), mass political party with tens of thousands of members; it is widely represented in the media (it prints the *Najot* newspaper and several magazines) and on the Internet. Set up in April 1973, it comes second after the Communist Party as the republic's oldest party; it is part of the rapidly accelerating process of bringing the Tajiks back to the fold of Islamic civilization, from which Soviet power detached them.

It is still hard to say how influential the CPT is or identify its place and importance in Tajikistan today; it has no money to publish periodicals, however it is represented in the parliament, which means that it should not be ignored.

Unlike in Russia, the people in Tajikistan were never absolutely negative about the Communists: their party is associated with economic stability, equal access to social boons, and the law and order of Soviet times. In contrast to the older generation, the youth thinks of the Soviet past as a "paradise lost."

All Tajik leaders over 40 were members of the Communist Party of Soviet Tajikistan; many of them are still devoted to the political, ideological and axiological attitudes of the Communist Party of Soviet times, which makes the CPT near and dear to their hearts.

Its continued solidarity with the Communist parties in the post-Soviet space and beyond is one of its advantages. In this respect, it is wondered whether this resource can be ignored if in Russia, Tajikistan's strategic partner and the country where hundreds of thousands of Tajik guest workers earn money, the Communist Party is the second influential political force (after the president); in China, Tajikistan's closest neighbor and its biggest economic partner the Communist Party is the ruling party. "No, we can't" is the obvious answer.

We should not forget another very important fact: Tajikistan, a far from rich country, is seeking political independence and closer relations with the West. The fairly strong opposition represented in

the parliament and state structures plays an important role in creating and maintaining relations with the West. This is a reality to be accepted: opposition parties in the Tajik political landscape should be at least tolerated.

In fact, Dushanbe considers its opposition parties and their presence in the parliament and state structures to be one of its main strategic resources (in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan this role belongs to oil and gas; in Uzbekistan, its geostrategic situation) indispensable for its relations with the world.

We should point out that no one doubted that the CPT would take part in the 2013 presidential election; the IRP, on the other hand, remained in two minds about its participation. Late in 2012, its chairman, Muhiddin Kabiri, informed the journalists who wanted to learn the name of the party's presidential candidate that the final decision belonged to the party's congress and that the congress might nominate either one of its members, or any other person.

This vagueness² spoke not only of his personal vacillations but also of disagreements in the party.

His comments prompted two conclusions. As the IRP leader, he was inclined to involve the party in the election campaign. At the same time, he was convinced that neither he himself nor any other party member should be nominated: the practically guaranteed re-election of President Rakhmon would have crippled his own political reputation or that of any other nominee.

Kabiri's political behavior was affected by one of the main principles of the IRP, which keeps it apart from all other parties both in Tajikistan and elsewhere. They were formulated by Said Abdullo Nuri, who founded the party and remained its leader until his death in August 2006.

In 1997, upon returning home from emigration, Nuri announced that the IRP was geared toward the Islamic revival of Tajikistan even if the party did not come to power. He pointed out that the results, rather than the leader, were important. This meant that if the people in power helped achieve this aim, even if this took more time than the IRP would have liked, the party would be on the side of the government.

This position was rooted in the movement's rationale: it was born as a response to the totalitarian ideology of the Soviet state based on atheism and was intended to ensure Tajikistan's Islamic revival through a state-of-the-art system of Islamic education and enlightenment. In Soviet times, Islamic education inevitably acquired political dimensions since it rejected the Soviet ideological doctrine.

At the same time, Nuri's ideas were never isolated from the context of a gradually unfolding movement for national revival started by the unceremonious replacement of First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan T. Uljabaev from his post on 12 April, 1961 and stronger Russification trends.

Different sections of the public differently responded to what the government was doing.

The creative intelligentsia (writers, actors and artists, academics, lecturers at higher educational establishments, students and post-graduate students) turned to the national roots and sources of national culture and started talking about the current linguistic situation and the future of the Tajik language. These concerns were shared by at least some members of the establishment. Abdullah Kakhkharov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Tajik S.S.R. in 1961-1973 who appreciated classical Tajik and Persian poetry, was one of them.

Young people became interested in Islam and religious education under the guidance of famous and respected spiritual authorities, as well as in classical Tajik and Arab literature.

² In September 2013 at the IRP congress he said that in December 2012 the Political Council had decided to take part in the elections (see: M. Kabiri's Speech at the Congress of the IRP on 17 September, 2013," *Najot*, No. 38, 19 September, 2013, available at [<http://www.nahzat.tj/haftanomai-najot/item/10127-najot-38-2013>], 5 December, 2014).

In 1972, in Moscow there appeared a fundamental work by Academician Bobojan Gafurov *The Tajiks* which offered the Soviet revival advocates what they wanted to find, i.e. a substantiated scholarly thesis according to which the history of the Tajiks and Central Asia were absolutely identical. The book became the bible of the Tajik educated community.

In 1973, the Islamic revival in the republic acquired organizational and political features: Said Abdullo Nuri set up the first cell of the future Islamic political party. According to those who were close to him—well-known journalist and Nuri's press secretary S. Khamad and Kh. Saifullozoda, one of the IRP leaders—Nuri liked to stress that the Islamic enlightenment activities of Sadridin Aini³ and Gafurov's *The Tajiks*⁴ were factors that made him determined to organize the still amorphous movement of Islamic enlightenment, which started gaining momentum in the latter half of the 1960s.

These people and many others testify to the fact that from the very beginning there were no obstacles between the secular and religious revival movements. Later, this helped Rakhmon and Nuri and their followers to reach an agreement and end the civil war.

It is thanks to this consensus that the national revival process is steadily going on with hardly any conflict.

It should be said that the IRP is not the only vehicle of the Islamic revival: there are traditional and highly respected Muslim religious figures, there is an official Islamic center, there are supporters of the Salafi, and there are other new movements independent of the IRP, the government, and each other.

The people in power are an important (although not always consistent) entity of the Islamic revival process; they build large mosques and do not interfere with the people, who want to do the same; and they are helping to build a contemporary system of Islamic education similar to that functioning in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey.

It was back in 2008, at a round table in Dushanbe organized by the Dialog NGO, that prominent sociologist Saodat Olimova first spoke about the government as one of the vehicles of the Islamic revival in Tajikistan.

The IRP and the Presidential Election

In the final analysis, the disagreements between the people at the top and the other entities of the national revival process (Islamic forces among them) are caused not so much by ideological as by purely political factors, the main being the question of power. We all know that the political field is highly competitive, which means that the opposition between the government and the IRP is caused not so much by the party's Islamic nature as by its real political weight.

The IRP has never treated power as its main goal; this means that it could have participated in the 2013 presidential election (despite its obvious outcome). It seems, however, that Kabiri was fully aware of the fact that any decision would have affected not only the party and its supporters. In view

³ Sadridin Aini (1878-1954), writer and first president of the Academy of Sciences of the Tajik S.S.R., one of the greatest figures in the public, literary, and cultural life of the Tajiks in the 20th century.

⁴ B.G. Gafurov (1909-1977), author of *The Tajiks*, First Secretary of the C.C. Communist Party of the Tajik S.S.R. in 1946-1956 and Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, and Academician of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences.

of the disagreements on the election issue among the party leaders, he tried to achieve a compromise that would suit both the party leaders and the public.

Late in February 2013, at a round table organized with support of IWPR and attended by practically all the officially registered parties and deputies, including members of the ruling PDPT, representatives of state structures, prominent public figures, and the media, Muhiddin Kabiri, after listening to the arguments in favor and against the IRP's participation in the election, announced that the party would be involved if its congress agreed. He formulated three possible variants of such involvement:

- (1) The IRP would support President Rakhmon if he guaranteed continued adherence to the spirit of the 1997 peace agreements, under which the party and government worked side by side.
- (2) The IRP would nominate an independent candidate from among well-known people unrelated to any of the political parties.
- (3) If none of the above proved tenable, the IRP would nominate its own candidate at the next party congress.

This meant that the IRP was ready to be involved, which made the upcoming election legitimate and created a new question about its candidate.

In March-April 2012, the party leaders organized several events of different scopes to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the party and add an international dimension to its activities. The presidential election was inevitably pushed aside for a while. In May, the revived issue became particularly topical and even developed into a challenge.

Early in May 2013, the IRP leaders invited representatives of the public (I was among them) to the party's premises where Muhiddin Kabiri pointed out that, before taking any specific steps, the party wanted to hear what the public thought about possible forms of the party's involvement in the election and its program. Opinions differed: some people wanted the party to take part in the election, others insisted on a boycott. To sum up, Kabiri said that the party planned to make such meetings regular.

The second meeting took place on 25 May, 2013; its results transformed these consultations into a special type of political activity.

These developments were indirectly prompted by the case of Zayd Saidov, a big businessman, Chairman of the Coordinating Council of Business Associations, the Association of Businessmen and Suppliers, Federation of Table Tennis of Tajikistan, and deputy of the Dushanbe majilis, who in 1999-2006 filled the post, under a quota, of Chairman of the Committee for Industry and later Minister for Industry of Tajikistan.

On 6 April, 2013, he announced that he intended to set up a political party he would call New Tajikistan; his declaration said that Tajik society was unsure of its future and needed a new idea, new message, new initiative, and new actions. He visualized the new party as a platform on which pragmatic-minded people, technocrats, and professionals could bring together their ideas, personalities, and potentials for the sake of national rebuilding. The founders pointed out that due to lack of time (they still had to register the party and complete all necessary preliminaries), they would not take part in the upcoming election.⁵

At first, the people in the corridors of power remained indifferent; Sukhrob Sharipov, one of the PDPT deputies, pointed out that this would positively affect the republic's party system. He also

⁵ See: R. Mirzobekova, "V Tadzhikestane objavleno o sozdanii novoy politicheskoy partii," *Asia Plus*, 6 April, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/140847>], 19 January, 2013.

warned that a new party meant another political rival at the election and that when challenged in this way the people in power would defend their positions. He added that a duel of nerves would be accompanied by rumors that might tarnish the party's image (he probably meant the New Tajikistan party).⁶

He proved right: by the end of April, the government retreated, for reasons unknown, from its previously favorable opinion: the people at the top probably started doubting (on their own initiative or at the instigation of people or forces acting in their own interests) that the initiators (all of them fairly rich people) had no presidential ambitions.

On 10 May, Saidov was summoned to the law and order structures⁷ (no one explained why); he was allowed to leave the country for France along with the national table tennis team. The next day, the Dushanbe public prosecutor's office opened a criminal case against him under Art 170 of the Criminal Code of the RT, which envisaged punishment for polygamy. Later he was accused of numerous economic crimes; his house was searched.⁸ It seemed that the government would prefer him to stay abroad.

After describing this in an interview with Radio Ozodi as political pressure, he returned on 19 May and was arrested at the airport. The next day, the deputies of the Dushanbe majilis deprived him of deputy immunity at the instigation of the prosecutor's office; on 22 May, the court of the Firdavsi District of Dushanbe sanctioned his arrest.⁹

Until the spring of 2013, Zayd Saidov manifested no political ambitions, which explains why information about his "party-building" initiative at the worst possible time came like a bolt from the blue. Those who knew him well spoke of him as a pragmatic and rational person, while his intention to set up a party on the eve of the election could hardly be described as rational. It would have been wiser to wait for a year and start the process after the political storms had subsided. Why did he act in this way is anyone's guess.

At a meeting at the IRP headquarters that took place three days after Zayd Saidov's arrest, passions flew high. After long discussions, it was decided that the country needed a Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society; it was set up on the spot out of representatives of the SDPT, IRP, initiative groups of the New Tajikistan and Vakhdat parties, independent public figures, human rights activists, journalists, etc. The new coalition elected a board under the chairmanship of R. Zoyirov, Chairman of the Legal Consortium and SDPT leader, IRP Deputy Chairman M. Hayt, representative of the New Tajikistan initiative group M. Kosymov, political scientist A. Mamadazimov, member of the SDPT Political Council Sh. Shonysayriev, Chairman of the NANSMIT (the National Association of Independent Media) N. Karshiboev, journalist R. Mirzobekova, M. Odinaev (father of S. Rizoiev),¹⁰ and K. Kanunov, who represented the youth.¹¹

⁶ See: M. Tursunzoda, "Novy Tadjikistan' mozhnet stat konkurentom dlia sushchestvuiushchikh partiy," *Asia Plus*, 8 April, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/140968>], 20 January, 2013.

⁷ See: S. Karaev, "Novy Tadjikistan' zaiavliaet ob ugrozakh v adres Zayda Saidova," *Asia Plus*, 10 May, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/143928>], 14 January, 2014.

⁸ See: Kh. Shodiev, "V dome Zayda Saidova proizveden obysk," *Asia Plus*, 11 May, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/144093>], 16 January, 2014.

⁹ See: "Zayd Saidov arestovan," *Asia Plus*, 22 May, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/news/zaid-saidov-arestovan>], 16 January, 2014.

¹⁰ Sunnatulo Rizoiev was held in Khujand prison. Along with Toshev and other prisoners, formerly warlords of the opposition, he leaked information about tortures. In October 2013, Toshev and Rizoiev were accused of "spreading false and offensive information," found guilty, and sentenced to eight and nine years in prison, respectively.

¹¹ See: "V Tadjikistane sozdana Koalitsiia za demokratiu i grazhdanskoe obshchestvo," *Asia Plus*, 25 May, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/146181>], 17 January, 2014.

The IRP and a Single Presidential Candidate

The coalition insisted on a single presidential candidate to represent its program. This was a mission impossible because the two main political forces—the IRP headed by Kabiri, on the one hand, and a political patchwork headed by SDPT Chairman Zoyirov, on the other—could not coordinate their approaches.

The IRP took part in the election to make it legitimate in order to exclude external interference, avoid destabilization, and keep the Islamic revival going. At the same time, fully aware of the election results, its rank-and-file members, the party leaders, to say nothing of the party chairman, agreed that the IRP should not choose a presidential candidate from among its ranks.

Those who closed ranks around the SDPT and Zoyirov looked forward to a victory as a *sine qua non* of democratic changes in the country and were unanimous in their opinion that the SDPT leader should be nominated. Rakhmatillo Zoyirov did not object; he was glad to accept this variant.

On 20 June, the media reported that in an interview with Group 24 in the social network *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates) Zoyirov had said: “I will run at the upcoming presidential election; more than that—I want to be the only candidate not only from the opposition parties or forces, but also from the democratic forces... I nominate myself and announce that I am ready to shoulder the responsibility for the country and people!”¹²

It was not easy to find a mutually acceptable candidate and to harmonize the very different approaches to the problem of taking part in/staying away from the elections. The coalition, later transformed into the Alliance of Reforming Forces of Tajikistan (ORST), was torn apart by the struggle for domination. A paradox was inevitable: the IRP was the strongest among the ORST members; all meetings and discussions were held in its office. At the early stages, the representatives of the ORST liberal democratic wing dominated; their emotional rhetoric found a response among at least some of the IRP members. The IRP chairman refused to be moved aside; at some point the IRP leaders guessed that the ORST was trying to rely on external forces. Kh. Sayfullozoda, editor of *Najot*, offered the following comment in the corridors of a conference: “We disrupted two attempts by external forces to stage a coup in Tajikistan.” He never specified which attempts he meant and who was behind them: the time has not come to reveal all the details was his only comment.

The IRP leadership and Kabiri stepped up their activity and coordinated the balance of power within the ORST and outside it. On 9 September, the struggle reached its peak: that day the ORST discussed its single presidential candidate—either IRP Chairman M. Kabiri or SDPT Chairman R. Zoyirov, M. Kasymov,¹³ Kh. Umarov,¹⁴ Kh.A. Turajonzoda,¹⁵ or O. Bobonazarova.¹⁶

The Social-Democratic Party wanted to nominate its leader; the IRP was looking for a suitable person outside the party whose nomination would be least damaging to the prospects for the Islamic revival. Oinihol Bobonazarova looked like the best option. Judging by the fairly passionate comments

¹² See: “Lider sotsial-demokratov zaiavil, chto gotov stat edinyim kandidatom na vyborakh prezidenta,” *Asia Plus*, 20 June, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/153121>], 17 January, 2014.

¹³ Makhmujon Kasymov, member of the initiative group of New Tajikistan.

¹⁴ Khojimuhammad Umarov, Doctor of Economic Sciences, member of the initiative group of New Tajikistan, in the past, one of the leaders of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT).

¹⁵ Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, one of the famous religious figures of Tajikistan, in the past head of the Kaziat of Tajikistan, first deputy of the head of the United Tajik Opposition, first deputy prime minister and deputy of the upper chamber of the Tajik parliament.

¹⁶ Oinihol Bobonazarova, human rights activist, leader of the public association called *Perspektiva+*, one of the leaders of democratic movement, in the past one of the active founders of the DPT, head of the office of the Soros Foundation in Dushanbe, advisor of the OSCE office and other international organizations represented in Tajikistan.

of those who took part in the discussion, the process was far from simple. The IRP leaders won the battle: all those seeking nomination withdrew their candidatures in favor of Bobonazarova.¹⁷

This did nothing to pacify the public; passions started spreading far and wide to the independent media, social nets, blogs, forums, etc. Disappointed by the ORST choice, those who wanted a regime change criticized or even slandered the IRP and its leader: he was accused of putting the party and personal interests above the common cause of moving toward democracy, as well as of even worse sins, of which collaboration with the government was the most neutral.

The critics and their political mentors had no electoral support; they counted on the IRP and its electorate to achieve the aims they believed to be important for the country and society. They refused to take into account that the IRP had its own interests related to the country's Islamic revival, a task that, in the Tajik context, tolerated no haste and no political speculations.

Wisely, the IRP kept away from media polemics. It answered all the critics at the party congress convened on 17 September, 2013 to approve Oinihol Bobonazarova as the single ORST candidate.

Speaking at the congress, Muhiddin Kabiri dotted all the "i's" by reminding the country that in the past the party had twice sided with other political forces: in 1991, it supported D. Khudonazarov as presidential candidate and the following spring sided with other political forces when rallies and demonstrations shook the country.¹⁸

He also told the audience that the party was still suffering from the negative effects of that period and pointed out that the party had become a people's party, more experienced and much wiser; it would never allow other political forces to gamble with the country's future to the accompaniment of talks about the interests and hopes of the people.

He informed the meeting that the time had gone when other parties regarded the IRP as a source of human potential to be used in their own interests.¹⁹ The congress approved the nomination of O. Bobonazarova as the ORST's single presidential candidate.

This ended the political process and ensured the legitimacy of the presidential election very much needed to prevent possible destabilization by internal or external forces. All other steps (transfer of documents to the Central Election Commission, collection of signatures) were technical rather than political tasks, yet they took an unexpected turn.

The IRP and Election Results: Success or Failure?

By the evening of 10 October (the last day of signature gathering), Oinihol Bobonazarova, having gathered about 202 thousand signatures out of the required 210 thousand, refused to submit them to the Central Election Commission and, as could be expected, was not registered for technical reasons. The presidential nominee blamed the republican authorities for the failure: they had launched a widescale campaign of slander against the IRP (which initiated the nomination in the first place), while the CEC deprived labor migrants (with the right to vote) of the right to sign.²⁰ On 12 October,

¹⁷ See: M. Tursunzoda, "Oinihol Bobonazarova stala edinyim kandidatom ot oppozitsii," *Asia Plus*, 10 September 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/170381>], 19 January, 2014.

¹⁸ In coalition with the Democratic Party, the National Democratic Movement Rastokhez, and the La'li Badakhshon National Movement, the IRP organized huge rallies, the prologue to a full-scale civil war.

¹⁹ See: M. Kabiri's Speech at the Congress of the IRP on 17 September, 2013.

²⁰ See: "Bobonazarova schitaet, chto antireklama protiv IRP ne pozvolila sobrat nuzhnoe kolichestvo podpissey," *Asia Plus*, 19 October, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/174087>], 16 January, 2014.

Central Election Commission Chairman Shermuhammad Shokhien informed his colleagues that if O. Bobonazarova had presented the signatures, they “would be able to help her somehow.”²¹

On 19 October, it became known that the CEC had ignored the arguments Kabiri offered in his letter to Sh. Shokhien (which could have made it possible to register Bobonazarova as a candidate) and refused to satisfy the IRP request.

Muhiddin Kabiri offered the following arguments:

- (a) The CEC has decided that each of the candidates should collect the signatures of 5% of the total number of voters, that is, 210 thousand signatures. At the same time, according to the CEC, there were 4,220,000 voters (later it quoted the figure of 4,340,000); this meant that 5% of the total number of voters was slightly over 200 thousand;
- (b) The CEC should have registered Oinihol Bobonazarova, who had collected over 202 thousand signatures, that is, over 5% of the total number of voters;
- (c) The CEC extended the time of signature gathering to 6 p.m. of the final day (10 October), but the day after the decision had been passed, Head of the CEC Administration A. Dodoev announced via the Asia Plus Information Agency at 08:02 a.m. on 10 October that Oinihol Bobonazarova had failed to gather the necessary number of signatures and had dropped out of the race.

In his interview with Asia Plus, Kabiri stated that the ORST would discuss its future steps at its next meeting: “we will probably stay away from the election and we will discuss how we will do this.”²²

On 21 October, in reference to the IRP Supreme Political Council’s statement, many Tajik newspapers reported that the party would not participate in the election because the CEC had refused to register O. Bobonazarova. At the same time, member of the IRP Supreme Political Council Mahmadali Hayt deemed it necessary to specify: “This should not be taken to mean that the party, which decided to refrain from participating in the election, will boycott it.”²³ This meant that the party leaders would not go to the polls, while the party members, as citizens of Tajikistan, were free to vote or not to vote.

The words we “would be able to help her somehow” meant that the refusal to be registered as a candidate provoked by what the government was doing took the CEC members by surprise.

The truth is that Oinihol Bobonazarova, who is well-known outside the country as a human rights activist with long experience of political struggle in the late 1980s-early 1990s and prison terms, could not permit herself to beg for registration. The CEC and the influential political forces behind it interpreted what she had done as a challenge and took the defensive. If they had demonstrated any flexibility (because it was clear to each and everyone that she had no chance of winning the election), the authorities could have earned more political and image points at home and abroad. On the other hand, by reducing their displeasure and disagreement from the political to the personal level, the IRP leaders demonstrated pragmatism.

Conclusion

On election day, President Emomali Rakhmon received 84.32% of the votes and was reelected president. Observers from the OSCE, EU, Western embassies in Dushanbe, and Western journalists

²¹ *Ozodagon*, 12 October, 2013.

²² “Tsentribirkom otkazal v registratsii O. Bobonazarovoy,” *Asia Plus*, 19 October, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/174083>], 2 February, 2014.

²³ “IRP vozderzhivaetsia ot uchastiia v prezidentskikh vyborakh,” *Asia Plus*, 21 October, 2013, available at [<http://www.news.tj/ru/node/174254>], 1 February, 2014.

were very critical, but never doubted the legitimacy of the election and its results. The CIS observers agreed that the election met all the democratic regulations.

The government did a lot to add legitimacy to the election and its results: it never objected to the ORST and its activities and it allowed all the independent media to cover the ups and downs of the election process up to and including the Saidov case.

Emomali Rakhmon carried the day, while the IRP behaved with dignity. It stuck to its course, avoided the rather unenviable fate of becoming a lever for those who wanted to ensure their interests outside the IRP, and preserved the Islamic revival in Tajikistan. Strange as it may seem, its far from straightforward relations with the powers that be helped it to a great extent.

The fact that the government regarded the IRP as a political rival consolidated the party's relations with the traditional Muslim figures: Salafis were released from prison under the pretext of improving relations with Saudi Arabia. The government started paying more attention to factors conducive to the Islamic revival in Tajikistan.

The country and its people reaped even greater benefit, at least for the time being: the election did not destabilize the country and deprived external forces of the chance to interfere in the country's internal affairs.