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- The Democratic Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and their Impact on Central Asian and Caucasian Politics
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REGIONAL POLITICS

**TAJIKISTAN:
THE 2005 ELECTIONS AND
THE FUTURE OF STATEHOOD**

Rashid ABDULLO

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On 13 December, 2004 President of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmonov signed a Decree on the next elections to Majlisi namoiandagon (Representative Assembly) scheduled for 27 February, 2005 and the Majlisi milli (National Assembly) scheduled for 24 March (two chambers of the Majlisi oli, the Supreme Assembly).

The new election cycle brought in by the February elections to the already fully developed (where its form and structure were concerned) representative branch of power was expected to put an end to the revolutionary epoch to bring in sedate lifestyle and even routine functioning of the new, post-Soviet Tajik state that had on the whole taken shape: domination of the presidential form of government which had monopolized entire power and the most important political initiatives in the near and mid-term future. The parliament had lost some of its political weight to the same extent that the president was gaining his. In fact, the legislature had no role to play. The same fully applies to other CIS countries; the Russia under Putin was no exception. In this respect the form of statehood the republic has finally acquired and the evolution of parliamentarism in it are not unique. They reflect the processes and general regularities typical of all CIS countries at the present stage.

Throughout the 1990s people of Tajikistan were mainly concerned with political issues: any more or less large group of people gathered for any occasion from weddings to funerals was very soon engrossed in political discussions about the war, peace, and power struggle. Public opinion polls carried out on the eve of the 2005 elections, by the Zerkalo sociological center in particular, revealed that the keen interest in politics had been replaced in people's minds with socioeconomic

concerns. All political forces had not so much to convince the nation of their ability to address the social and political issues in the best and most effective way as to demonstrate the voters that much had already been done.

None of the political parties resolved to join the race could compete with the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) not only because its administrative resource was large. The PDPT, the party of power, had another obvious advantage in the person of its leader—President Rakhmonov. His name has been firmly connected in the minds of an absolute majority with the main achievements of the independence period: end of the civil war, restored territorial integrity and national unity, a stronger state that no longer has to take the virtually independent former field commanders into account, economic growth by 10 percent in the last three to four years, etc.

It was absolutely clear from the very beginning that the voters would be no longer engrossed in the details of political rivalry mainly because the parliament had no longer been seen as the key political structure able to affect the course of events in the country. It was regarded, at best, as an institution more or less able to fulfill its routine task of building up a legal foundation for the country's further development. In short, it had lost its image of a political structure. The nation, on the other hand, had lost its keen interest in politics to the extent it remained barely interested in the way this election campaign would be different from the previous one of 2000 and in the parties' performance. The PDPT was an obvious favorite; two more parties—the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT) and the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)—stood a good chance of winning parliamentary seats: they had a broad following, while their success promised the republic's leaders certain political and other advantages. It only remained to be seen how many seats they would get.

It should be said that many (if not the absolute majority) of the PDPT members and the party leaders are former communists who find the CPT a predictable and adequate partner or even a potential ad hoc ally. The country's leaders had to take into account the fact that in many other CIS countries communist parties were still enjoying support of a large share of nations and that in Russia, the country of special importance for Tajikistan, the communist party was the second important political power.

Parliamentary seats for the IRPT, the only Islamic political party in Tajikistan incorporated into power, make it possible to preserve peace and stability in the country, consolidate power and achieve the republic's favorable image outside its borders.

The concrete number of the seats these two parties might win was irrelevant from the point of view of the PDPT domination in the parliament: its control was absolute. A shadow of election intrigue, however, was positive from the point of view of further development of parliamentarism and political pluralism: it taught power to be no longer too much concerned with election results, while society was growing accustomed to multiparty elections. On the whole, the authorities that backed the PDPT needed a slightly larger representation of two other large parties and deputies of any third party, which would have never impaired its ability to control the parliament. Election rivalry is good for the image of the authorities at home and especially abroad.

2

Having scored a victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections, the PDPT lost no time: it started readying for the next election cycle. The IRPT that came third in the 2000 race opted for a highly pragmatic cooperation/opposition course when dealing with the authorities and the party of power. The events of February 2003, when a group of deputies of both chambers initiated a process of introducing changes and amendments, mainly of the social and political nature, into the Constitution, urged the Communist Party and the parties that described themselves as opposition parties—the Democratic, Socialist, and the Social-Democratic—to follow suit.

At the next stage of the new election cycle all political parties joined a campaign for amending the Constitutional Law on Elections to the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan. The process of drafting the amendments and pushing them through the parliament proved to be a test on the eve of the next elections.

On 3 November, 2003 the opposition set up a Coalition of the Political Parties for Transparent and Fair Elections—a step that invited negative consequences for them. On that day Rakhmatullo Zoirov who headed the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) and Makhmadruzi Iskandarov, chairman of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), reached an agreement on a coalition. Later they were joined by the IRPT and CPT. It was a godsent opportunity for the smaller parties that stood no chance of overcoming the 5 percent barrier independently. Clearly, the coalition was resolved to lobby the new draft of the election law which, they hoped, would improve their chances to be elected and to ensure a transparent election campaign across the country or, at least, their ability to control it.

The authorities were alarmed: the coalition appeared at the time when the Rose Revolution was budding and burst out in Georgia. Central Asia as a whole painfully responded to the Georgian developments. What is more, while power was coping with big and small problems plaguing the country, the smaller parties did their best to enlist support by dwelling on unpleasant or even negative realities such as bribery, inefficient personnel policy, the primacy of political and other considerations over the law, etc. inevitable in a country moving away from the old, Soviet system, in which it had lived for decades, to an absolutely different one.

There is a fairly widely shared opinion that the problems that the DPT and SPT, and later the SDPT experienced when the election campaign was in full swing were caused, among other things, by their involvement in the coalition. In the fall of 2003 DPT leader Makhmadruzi Iskandarov deemed it expedient to leave the capital for his native Tajikabad District, high in the mountains in the country's east, where he had commanded armed opposition during the civil war. As soon as the General Agreement was signed, he was invited to the cabinet as Chairman of the Emergency Committee; later he was promoted to Major General. He filled several important official posts, the latest of them being at the head of Tajikgaz company. In April 2004 he returned to the capital to meet the president; their confidential talk lasted several hours. The discussions of possible amendments to the election law spoiled his relations with the country's leader once more. Late in August he left the country ostensibly to look into family matters elsewhere.

In the summer of 2004 another opposition party—the SPT headed by Mirkhuseyn Narziev split into two new parties. Narziev headed one of them; the other was headed by Abdukhalim Gafforov. Since that time on the two parties have remained locked in struggle for the party's name since the law does not permit several parties with identical names. The opposition parties and the Communist Party, however, looked at the Narziev party as the Socialist Party, while the PDPT remained neutral. Power represented by the Ministry of Justice was biding for time under the pretext that the case required a careful investigation of all concomitant circumstances.

3

Between 17 and 19 December, as soon as the decree on the next parliamentary elections appeared, all parties, at their congresses, endorsed their election platforms and lists of candidates. The PDPT, CPT, and IRPT demonstrated a lot of organizational skills: their congresses were smooth and uneventful, while the congresses of smaller parties (DPT, SDPT, and SPT) developed into discussion clubs. Iskandarov, absent from the country at that time, headed the DPT list of candidates, which forced part of the deputies to leave the congress in protest of ignoring their opinion on the issue. The SDPT leaders tried to move away from bureaucratic practice while drawing the lists: they let the congress delegates themselves change the pre-prepared lists arranged in alphabetic order and later endorse it by

secret ballot. They failed to consistently realize this novelty since a compromise was obviously needed: Rakhmatullo Zoirov, the SDPT chairman, and Sultan Kuvatov, leader of the unregistered Tarakkiet Party with which the SDPT had allied for the election campaign, were Nos. 1 and 2 on the list. The rest of the list was compiled by secret ballot. The two SPT hypostases (the parties of Narziev and Gafforov) held two congresses that predictably produced two lists; each of the parties insisted on being the only and true Socialist Party of Tajikistan.

The parties then approached another hurdle: they had to submit their lists and other relevant documents to the Central Election Commission for registration. The Narziev party was denied registration because the election law did not allow two parties to run for elections under the same name, while a letter from the Ministry of Justice to the CEC had, in fact, recognized the legitimacy of the Gafforov party. At the same time, the Central Election Commission pointed out that it could refuse to register the DPT and SDPT lists as well: the former contained the name of Makhmadruzi Iskandarov, against whom criminal proceedings had been started; the latter included the name of Sultan Kuvatov who had to remain in the republic under recognizance not to leave and against whom criminal proceedings had been started, too. He was also accused of fanning ethnic strife. The parties had to remove the offending names from the lists—the SDPT went even further by removing all Tarakkiet members from its list.

The opposition parties applied to the Central Election Commission with complaints against local election commissions that refused to register their representatives. The local commissions went as far as insisting on conditions not stipulated by the election law. For example, they demanded full texts of the party's election platform, birth certificates of those of the candidates who had changed names, documents testifying to the absence of tax arrears and back rent, etc. Under the new election law the candidates had to deposit an amount of money equal to 200 minimal wages (equivalent to \$800). The opposition parties complained that they were prevented from making such deposits on time, while delays were fraught with removing candidates from the race.

4

As of 14 January the Central Election Commission registered 21 candidates of PDPT; 15 candidates of IRPT; 9 candidates of CPT; 7 candidates of SDPT; 5 candidates of SPT, and 4 candidates of DPT. According to the Central Election Commission, 209 candidates applied to be registered by one-candidate constituencies, 120 of them being self-nominees. Others were nominated by political parties: the PDPT had candidates in all while the IRPT, in 22 constituencies. Finally, the PDPT managed to register 41 people as candidates in one-candidate constituencies; the IRPT, 20; the CPT, 13; the SDPT and SPT, 6 candidates each.

The PDPT and IRPT had much more candidates than the other parties—this was the main result of the registration stage. These two parties also demonstrated inordinate activity while competing for seats in regional, city, and district legislatures. It became obvious that the IRPT had replaced the CPT as the second (after the PDPT) most influential political force.

The party earned this success by its consistent and painstaking efforts to enlist supporters by communicating with ordinary people—something that each political party is expected to do. It was the only PDPT rival that was doing this after the 2000 parliamentary elections; it had adjusted itself to the new social, economic, political, psychological, and other conditions that had emerged or were emerging in the country. The leaders capitalized on the nation's obviously decreased reluctance to accept an Islamic party in Tajikistan. Finally, the party had managed to raise necessary funds to place deposits for each of its candidates. In this respect, too, it proved to be more competitive than all the other PDPT rivals.

5

On 27 February the nation went to the polls for the second time in its history to elect the parliament's lower chamber. Nobody expected unpleasant surprises—everything was expected to follow the course typical of other CIS countries. This means that the “big three” (PDPT, CPT, and IRPT) would carry the day, while the “smaller three” (DPT, SDPT, and SPT) would be satisfied with the very chance of running for the parliament in view of the problems the parties faced during the election cycle.

The election day produced no surprises—everything went on as it had been expected. In fact, an election campaign is a true reflection of the country's social and political development level. Tajikistan was no exception from the rule: the present level of the republic's (and of all other CIS countries, for that matter) social and political development did not allow it to organize elections according to the standards much closer to the Western ones. This happens only in the context of a deep political crisis when power is weak and still weakening, while the discontented popular masses openly question its legitimacy. Tajikistan experienced this 15 years ago: the 1990 elections were commonly agreed to be the most democratic in the republic's history.

On the next day, 28 February, the Central Election Commission published the election results it cautiously described as preliminary: 80 percent of the voters preferred the PDPT party list (the party also carried the majority of the votes in one-candidate constituencies). The IRPT and the CPT came second and third, while the DPT, SDPT, and the Gafforov SPT were left outside the parliament. The Central Election Commission qualified the elections as successful, democratic, transparent and, on the whole, corresponding to the Western standards, despite certain miscalculations on the pre-vote stage and the election day.

The PDPT agreed with the Central Election Commission; the Gafforov SPT also agreed. In an interview to Radio Liberty Tajik service Prof. K. Vosiev, the SPT deputy chairman, said that the party had admitted its defeat. The leaders of other parties, however, were loudly protesting against the published results and issued a joint Statement of the Political Parties of the Republic of Tajikistan about Gross Violations of the Constitutional Laws: On the Elections to the Majlisi Oli of the RT and On the Elections of Deputies to the Local Majlisis of the People's Deputies. They demanded, in particular, that the results of voting in Dushanbe be annulled and another round carried out, otherwise the four parties and Narziev's SPT that sided with them threatened “to withdraw from the Council of Social Agreement of Tajikistan, announce that they refuse to accept election results across the country and recall their deputies from the Majlisi namoiandagon and the local majlisis of people's deputies.”

The negative response was expected, yet nobody expected an ultimatum. The signatures and public statements of the Communist Party's leaders came as an unpleasant surprise: it was for the first time in many years that they took part in a political action that formulated harsh demands and even threatened, together with the SDPT leader, with public actions, including protest rallies. The republic was plunged into a state novel to it: grave post-election political confrontation.

The authorities preferred to avoid any direct response to the statement, the only exception being that on 1 March Chairman of the Central Election Commission Mirzoali Boltuev convened a press conference to announce that, according to the latest figures, the PDPT got 74.9 percent of the votes (as against 64.9 percent in 2000); the CPT, 13.4 percent (20.9 percent); the IRPT, 8.94 percent (7.31 percent). This gave the PDPT 17 seats by party lists; the CPT, 3; the IRPT, 2. Along with the seats gained in one-candidate constituencies, the PDPT got even a wider majority in the parliament: 51 seats; the CPT got 5; the IRPT got 2 in all. Obviously, as compared with the previous elections, the Communist Party did much worse, while the Islamic Revival Party, much better.

The final figures could not conceal the obvious: the IRPT became the second influential political force in the country after the PDPT. The very fact that the authorities had to agree to the IRPT's previously announced figures and publish the data indicating that its following had increased demon-

strated that it not only consolidated its positions but also gained a lot of political weight. The authorities and the public have not yet learned how to assess the situation calmly and adequately because of certain domestic (the Soviet past, suspicions born by the years of political instability and the civil war, etc.) and external factors (the neighbors were still reluctant to accept the fact of an Islamic party legally functioning in Tajikistan).

6

The authorities refused to directly respond to the demands formulated by the dissatisfied political parties for the following reasons.

First, the nation refrained from immediate mass support for the demands because the majority of the politically active population is still associating mass protests in support of any of the political forces with outwardly similar actions of 1991-1992 that had triggered the civil war.

Second, while the people are prepared to vote in great numbers they are prepared to defend their choice only if their practical interests, such as jobs and therefore the source of the means of subsistence, are threatened. For example, since the employees of a large enterprise Bodom LLC in Kanibadam (that employs a large part of the city's population) realized that their jobs were threatened, they started picketing the local administration to demonstrate their support of Iu. Akhmedov (a former deputy to the parliament and the Bodom founder where he still carried much weight) in his opposition to the influential figures of the Sogd Region.

Third, as soon as one of the international observers of the CIS said over the republican TV that to his mind such demands were fraught with political destabilization in the country, the dissatisfied parties abandoned their offensive positions, thus lowering the confrontation level.

Fourth, since the IRPT and the CPT could lose a lot along with the seats in the parliament and local majlisis, they carefully avoided harsh statements. The IRPT wished to be regarded as a serious force seeking national unity and stronger independence for Tajikistan. Naturally enough its leader S.A. Noori did not want to endanger the party's prestige and positions because criticism by action of the election results might have become interpreted as detrimental to the cause of peace and stability. For this reason, First Deputy Chairman M. Kabiri who appeared at all post-election events was carefully preserving political leeway. When pestered with a question whether his party would support protest actions he had to finally say that if at all, such support would only be moral. Translated into common tongue, this meant a negative answer. In the early 1990s the party was a constant and important member of all sorts of opposition blocs and alliances—today, its position excluded a possibility of mass protest actions. Naturally, the party accepted the candidate mandates it had won.

The new figures published by the Central Election Commission quenched the Communist Party's opposition zeal. A group of fairly important members of the Dushanbe local party organization together with Abdudjabbor Akhmedov and Bury Sultonov, leaders of the Sogd and Kurgantiube zonal party organizations, respectively, harshly criticized the party leader Sholdi Shabdolov. If continued, the discussion about whether to support the Statement threatened with a split; the party opted for pragmatism and finally accepted the deputy mandates.

Fifth, Russia and the United States, two large countries with a lot of possibilities of influencing the local developments, responded to the election results more or less similarly. Moscow minced no words about its positive assessment presented by the CIS observers and the RF Embassy in Dushanbe.

Washington that could hardly accept the elections as corresponding to the American standards had to voice its opinion. On the other hand, the U.S. had to look after its national interests in Afghanistan; life forced it to describe the elections in positive terms with certain reservations. The dual assessment was the solution. Thus Senator Mackein severely criticized the parliamentary elections that

had taken place simultaneously in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and suggested that the United States should revise its relations with these countries, while the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe made a statement in which it mentioned the shortcomings and positively described the elections as a whole by saying that they were another step in the right direction along the long road leading to democracy. Later, in his interview to the *Azia Plus* newspaper American Ambassador Richard Hoagland said that the elections had been another important step forward, that they could be described as success at the initial stage, that Rome was not built in one day and that the road to democracy was a difficult one.

The ambassador voiced the position of the U.S. executive power which was more important for Tajikistan—today in the United States (and the CIS countries) the position of the president determines many issues, at least when it comes to foreign policy. To succeed in Afghanistan and protect its national interests there the United States needs, among other things, political stability in Central Asia. The local governments can preserve this stability; they also want closer ties with the United States as a factor of their stronger national independence. Tajikistan has something absent in other countries (and not only there): I have in mind a dialog between the authorities and all legal political parties. It seems that the dialog will go on. The pragmatic American politicians are quite satisfied with this for today. Russia, the U.S. and the West do not seem to be ready to support the IRPT and the CPT to spite the PDPT if only because ideologically, politically, and civilizationally these parties have nothing in common with these states.

Two days after the elections it became absolutely clear that the nation and international community refused to support the post-election protests of the dissatisfied parties. This, and Russian and American support of the election results allowed the country's leaders to merely take into account the critical comments of the OSCE observers. On 3 March President Rakhmonov signed a decree under which fixed 17 March as the date of the newly elected Majlisi's first session. The post-election stage was over, the lower chamber met on the fixed date, the session being attended by the deputies of the Islamic Revival and the Communist parties. From that time on, the authorities and the dissatisfied political parties will sort things out among themselves within certain limits no matter how tense their relations will be. They will no longer evoke public response—in other words, 2005 elections became history.

7

It is no accident that the PDPT whose ideology can be described as national revival and the IRPT that proceeds from the principles of national-religious revival have become the republic's key political forces. At the present stage of state and social development these ideologies formulate the most urgent tasks addressed within the context of both parties' revival programs. These parties are also more concerned than the others with two other important components of national revival: the secular nature of the new Tajik state (PDPT) and the Islamic identity of the absolute majority of the nation (IRPT).

This adds urgency to the question of the relations between the two parties: mutual ignoring will bring political dividends to neither; conflicts are even less profitable from the point of view of national interests, stronger peace and stability. A conflict between the two parties will undoubtedly make it harder for the IRPT to continue its political activities or will even endanger its continued existence. The PDPT will not profit from this either, especially against the background of the far from simple developments in the neighboring countries and the "colored revolutions" problem that has come to the fore in the post-Soviet expanse. It is vitally important for the parties to preserve mass following and even increase it.

The events in Georgia and Ukraine have shown that those of the post-Soviet rulers who have no allies sharing the authorities' national aims and able to mobilize the masses in support of power will find themselves in a quandary in the case of a "colored revolution." And vice versa, it is hard

or even impossible to stage a “colored revolution” against the rulers enjoying strong support in their countries.

Neither the PDPT nor the IRPT will survive a colored revolution: today, they are far removed from the Western liberal values and will not move closer to them in the near future. The two parties should closely cooperate to help the country withstand the pressure of new challenges and to address national tasks, to create conditions in which the national Tajik state and the Tajiks as an ethnic group will be able to survive. These two parties are the most numerous parties, they have much in common, in any case much more in common than with all other political structures of Tajikistan.

Political reality in our country, as well as in other countries in the region and the world, will force the two parties to follow the latter of the variants, namely, coexistence with cooperation and not without rivalry. Today, there is much more cooperation in Tajikistan when it comes to deal with the vitally important tasks: stronger peace and stability; independence; and effective opposition to the efforts to draw the country into doubtful international political projects that promise nothing for the republic. Cooperation will probably extend into the future. At the local level, however, the parties will remain rivals for the simple reason that in this case they directly influence the masses. Nothing, though, will change at this level, too—at least not in the near future.

No matter how the relations between the two leading political forces will develop it is highly important that they will be flexible and remain within the legal limits. They should not develop into a bitter confrontation because it may end in a catastrophe for the young Tajik state.