



## Tajikistan in Brief

Shortly after declaring independence in 1991, a civil war broke out in Tajikistan between the Soviet-era ruling elite and loosely-aligned ethnic and regional opposition groups. The five-year conflict left more than 150,000 dead and 2.2 million displaced in a country with a population of around six million at the time. The war ended in 1997 with a ceasefire, a general amnesty, and an agreement for opposition groups to get 30 percent of government positions.

Key Data	
GDP (2020)	\$8.2 billion
FDI (2019)	\$212.8 million
Population	9.5 million
Freedom House Freedom Score (2021)	8/100
TI Corruption Perceptions Index Score (2020)	25/100

One man - People’s Democratic Party Leader President Emomali Rahmon - has ruled the country since November 1992. His authoritarian control is absolute, and, along with his family, he keeps a tight grip on the economy and political space despite the 1997 ceasefire’s pledge of political pluralism. The government has outlawed opposition parties, banned independent media, and harshly punished dissent. Rahmon’s regime has driven most civil society activists and associated independent lawyers underground or into exile. Even those who flee the country are not safe, as numerous accounts of transnational harassment and repression have demonstrated.

## The Human Rights Agenda

Tajikistan’s government is extremely repressive. In this environment, the primary human rights concerns include the crackdown on opposition parties, the systematic use of arbitrary detention and dangerous prison conditions, transnational repression, and the persecution of lawyers.

### Crackdown on Political Opposition

*Tajikistan should comply with UN decisions and immediately release, rehabilitate, and compensate unlawfully detained people. In order to prevent future political persecution, Tajikistan should revise the Counter-Terrorism Act (1999), the Anti-Extremism Act (2003), and the Criminal Code to align them with international standards.*

Rahmon’s regime has sought to dismantle all viable political opposition in the country, especially the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the backbone of the opposition coalition during the civil war. After war’s end, the IRPT turned into a leading moderate Islamist voice in the region. While the party gained some political power, it lost all of its parliamentary seats in the 2015 elections following a government smear campaign and election abuses. Subsequently accelerating its repression, the regime ordered the IRPT’s closure, arrested and imprisoned its top leaders, some for life, and declared it a terrorist organization. Dushanbe used the Law on Combatting Terrorism to ban the IRPT and other opposition parties, as well as the distribution of materials related to the groups. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found the IRPT’s leaders’ imprisonment to be a violation of international law and called for their release.

### Arbitrary Detention and Life-Threatening Prison Conditions

*Tajikistan should investigate, prosecute, and punish all instances of torture, ill-treatment and deaths in torture—which includes those who died in the attacks at Prison 3/3 and Kirpichniy Prison—and ensure that victims are appropriately rehabilitated and compensated.*

Rahmon exerts near-total control over the judiciary, and uses it as an extension of the executive branch. Government critics can be arrested with scant evidence, politically-motivated trials proceed without respect for due process, and defendants can be subjected to lengthy prison sentences without the ability to appeal. Those convicted are kept under life-threatening prison conditions. Torture and other abuse are endemic in Tajikistani prisons and police stations, and law enforcement officers routinely torture and mistreat individuals to extract self-incriminating evidence, confessions, and

money. Political prisoners and prisoners with life sentences suffer particularly harsh conditions, including long isolation in cramped and unventilated cells, and physical, verbal, and mental abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated risks faced by detainees as standard health precautions were not taken. Tajikistan recently experienced two deadly prison riots, reportedly resulting in the deaths of 80 prisoners. Members of the Islamic State instigated both riots, and according to reports sought out members of IRPT and other religious minority groups in at least one.

### Persecution of Lawyers

*Tajikistan must end judicial harassment of lawyers and release those already imprisoned on wrongful charges, including Buzurgmehr Yorov, Saidnuriddin Shamsiddinov, Abdulmajid Rizoiev, and Izzat Amon.*

Independent lawyers who represent individuals in politically-sensitive cases face enormous pressure and punishment, including arbitrary arrest, intimidation, and death threats. One notable lawyer punished for representing IRPT activists is Buzurgmehr Yorov, who was sentenced to more than 20 years on trumped-up national security charges and for allegedly failing to provide satisfactory legal services. The government has taken steps to curtail the independence of the bar. Following changes in 2015 the Ministry of Justice took over licensing of lawyers, and lawyers were required to retake the bar examination every five years and answer questions unrelated to law, such as on history and culture. Following the changes, the number of licensed lawyers in the country fell from more than 1,200 in 2015 to just 600 in 2017.

### Transnational Repression

*Tajikistan should stop conducting transnational repression and abusing international measures, such as the INTERPOL Red Notice system, to target dissident Tajik citizens living abroad.*

Tajikistan frequently harasses and threatens dissidents living abroad and their relatives at home. In 2020, Austria extradited opposition activist Hizbullo Shoalozoda, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison on extremism charges just months after being forcibly returned to Tajikistan. An Austrian court later ruled that his extradition should have never taken place. The government has also resorted to kidnapping, including of opposition member Sharofiddin Gadoev, who was abducted in Moscow and returned to Dushanbe in 2019. The following day Interior Ministry authorities offered Gadoev one of three options: execution, 25 years to life in prison, or to cooperate with authorities and allege that the IRPT is financed from abroad. The court charged Gadoev with various crimes. He was eventually allowed to return to the Netherlands. Incidents of apparent transnational repression continue, with an uptick observed following protests which turned violent in November 2021.

## Tajikistan in the International Context

Tajikistan, the poorest nation in Central Asia, is extremely dependent on remittances, which make up about 30% of its GDP, and foreign assistance. Most worker remittances come from Russia, giving it considerable leverage over Tajikistan's economy and society. Russia also has a significant military presence in Tajikistan, and recently bolstered its forces after the return of the Taliban. Tajikistan generally welcomes Russia's presence and its role as security guarantor.

Tajikistan has also welcomed Chinese largess, including projects associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative, though the public is skeptical of China. Tajikistan's reliance on Chinese investment has made it among the most indebted countries to China. Sixty percent of Tajikistan's external debt (\$1.98 billion) is owed to one Chinese bank as of early 2022. Bordering China and Afghanistan, Tajikistan is of strategic interest to China, which recently bolstered its security presence in Tajikistan along the Afghanistan border to strengthen border and internal security in the country.

While Tajikistan's relations with Turkey are small, likely because they do not share Turkic heritage or language, it is a major recipient of E.U. and U.S. assistance, and is looking to deepen those relationships. Tajikistan's hardline anti-Taliban stance may ingratiate it with the U.S. policymakers, who have seen Tajikistan as a key player in regional connectivity and economic projects.