CURRENT POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN TAJIKISTAN

An Interview with Muhiddin Kabiri
Conducted by Sebastien Peyrouse (Central Asia Program, GWU)

May 10, 2021

Although many articles have been written about the IRPT, especially since the party was banned by the government of Tajikistan in 2015 and faced charges of terrorism, Mr. Kabiri and the IRPT have had limited opportunities to directly present their views. They are not alone in this; recent years have witnessed the curtailment of opportunities for opposition to speak out inside Tajikistan, where “the political opposition has been devastated by a sustained campaign of repression”. As several human rights organizations attest, the government of Tajikistan is ranked among the most authoritarian in the world and the incumbent president, Emomali Rahmon, has been re-elected several times following elections that international observers found not to be conducted according to international standards.

Muhiddin Kabiri is a Tajik politician, Chairman of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), Chairman of the National Alliance of Tajikistan and a member of the International Forum for the Islamist Parliamentarian (IFIP). He was a member of the National Reconciliation Commission which was established to implement the provisions of the peace agreement that ended the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997) and was a deputy in the Tajik parliament from 2005 to 2015. Muhiddin Kabiri is a graduate of the State University of Tajikistan and, after the civil war, he studied at Sana’a University in Yemen and later at the Diplomatic Academy in Moscow. He has published several books and hundreds of articles and interviews on various topics regarding Islam and de-radicalization in Central Asia in Tajik, Russian, English, Persian and Arabic.
Mr. Kabiri has faced charges similar to those leveled against the IRPT. However, the Tajik judicial proceedings have not been recognized by the international community or by international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Tajikistan is a participating State. The Tajik government’s decision to ban the IRPT was the result of an opaque process in a country where the separation of powers is almost non-existent, and the government of Tajikistan has not provided tangible evidence of the alleged terrorist activities. Mr. Kabiri and other representatives of the IRPT therefore continue to participate in international platforms, such as the annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

In 30 years of independence, there have been no real political alternatives in Tajikistan. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, along with other opposition groups, such as Group24, is calling for the development of real political alternatives as an essential step toward democratizing the country. Yet presidential successions do not necessarily lead to significant political change, as we have seen in other countries, including Turkmenistan and, more recently, Kazakhstan. What steps would be necessary to achieve real systemic change?

Changing the situation in our country will require fundamental changes in the governance system. Corruption, dictatorship, and nepotism are so deeply rooted in the government that replacing one person with another like-minded person, such as Rahmon’s son or daughter, might give people some short-term hope but will not provide a long-term solution to the many issues Tajikistan is facing. A few years ago, some people, including me, hoped that Rahmon’s government would be able to change itself. Hence, we encouraged him to abide by international standards and implement reforms, but these never materialized. Today, I consider that although the situation is deteriorating every day, Rahmon and his system are no longer able to change.

Both the Tajik people and foreign friends of our country must recognize this difficult situation and understand that further tolerance of the current governance system entails giving up or even endorsing this bitter reality. All legitimate international tools to hold the current government accountable for its actions, including human rights abuses, therefore need to be used to give Tajikistan a chance to free itself from this dictatorial regime and to instead be able to develop with a government willing to build a truly democratic and constitutional state.

These words might sound a bit radical and perhaps dreamy, but it has become essential to go beyond abstract rhetoric and concepts. I believe that responsible politicians and people
need to act to avoid power being seized by dissatisfied but potentially dangerous people, which could have destructive consequences for the country and its people.

Every year, unemployment and the lack of job prospects compel several hundred thousand Tajiks to emigrate. The government has supported migration, which constitutes a safety valve for the economy and the stability of the country. Yet this security valve, which relies on external factors, turns out to be fragile, as evidenced by the impact of EU sanctions on Russia and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have significantly contracted the job market in Russia and elsewhere. What major steps to address unemployment could Rahmon have taken? Do you think that immigration should be encouraged as a remedy for unemployment?

Since coming to power, Rahmon has not implemented any programs to provide Tajikistani youth with jobs. Instead of building factories and enterprises and developing the economy, the president has spent most of the state funds on the construction of luxury buildings, celebrations, and events. Hence, for many Tajikistani young men, the economic situation in Russia and Kazakhstan has been more attractive than in Tajikistan. Moreover, the president has encouraged the labor force to emigrate and send remittances to their families.

Rahmon enjoys three benefits of this policy. First, all banks and remittance systems are owned by his family. Remittances are therefore a significant source of profit for himself and his family, earning them an estimated several hundred million dollars per year. Second, labor migrants’ remittances are essential to preventing the country’s economy from collapsing. Tajikistan has the highest ratio of remittances to GDP worldwide [28.6 percent in 2019 according to the World Bank—ed.]. Finally, Rahmon considers the youth residing in the country as a threat to regime security. Hence, encouraging young men to work and live abroad mitigates the challenges his government might face; women, children, and the elderly are not viewed as a destabilizing factor.

Despite the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and Western countries’ sanctions on Russia, which have impacted the labor market for migrants, Rahmon will seek to keep this young labor force outside of the country. The youth may criticize the political authorities on social networks from abroad, but this is unlikely to impact the regime significantly. In the event of a political crisis, which might result from the deterioration of the country’s economic situation, it would be easier to control a dissatisfied population that consisted mainly of elderly people or children.

Neighboring countries—for example, Kazakhstan—have encouraged Islamic funding and funding from Islamic organizations such as the
Islamic Development Bank (IDB), private Islamic banks, or the sovereign funds of Gulf countries. Do you think this should be supported to stimulate the Tajikistani economy?

Rahmon has made efforts and even prepared the country's legislation to cooperate with Islamic financial institutions and the Gulf countries. Five to ten years ago, Islamic financial institutions and the Gulf countries showed interest in Tajikistan and started conducting activities.

However, in contrast to Kazakhstan, high levels of corruption, a lack of banking transparency, and the unfriendly investment climate have undermined the opportunities to implement significant projects and have made our country less attractive for large investments. In such circumstances, only capital with political undertones, such as that coming from China, is likely to be invested in the country.

One question linked to the unemployment problem is education, which has significantly deteriorated throughout the country. What would be the main steps to improve education? Does improving education include the development of religious education institutions, such as madrassas or Islamic universities, as in some other Muslim countries?

The education sector has been weakened by the lack of infrastructure and by a process of ideologization conducted by Rahmon. Tajikistan indisputably inherited the Soviet ideologized education system; however, in Soviet times, more state funding and better working conditions for teaching staff to some extent mitigated these shortcomings. Today, curricula do not aim to train independent people that could be perceived as a threat to the regime. Education in Tajikistan seeks to frame "proper" citizens and make them subservient to the views, ideology, and ways of thinking of Rahmon, including in their dress and appearance. Hence, for a very low salary, teachers train two categories of people: labor migrants and “followers of the leader.” From elementary school, those who do not fit into the latter category should be prepared to live and work abroad. Additionally, powers-that-be use teaching staff on election days. Since elections are often held in school buildings, teachers—who are also members of election commissions—are asked to control ballot boxes in order to secure the required number of votes in favor of the “leader of the nation.”

The situation of religious education is worse. The government has destroyed the infrastructure of the traditional religious education system and has failed to replace it with a proper system. Traditional religious education, as it was conducted for centuries in Central Asia, had and still has many shortcomings and needs improvement. However, this
educational system was a significant moral and intellectual barrier against extremism and the radical religious ideas that have emerged in the region in recent years.

The government has been willing to maintain strong and reputable traditional religious educational institutions and to partner with them in many national programs while at the same time controlling them, as it has done with secular education, and using them as an ideological and political tool. The impairment of the religious education system, the loss of credibility of imams and official religious institutions, and their lack of capacity to meet the people’s religious needs have certainly contributed to the radicalization of young Tajiks and their joining of extremist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and others. Overall, the government’s lack of will to implement programs to improve secular and religious education—combined with economic and political crisis—is a fundamental challenge to the future of the country.

Energy security is a recurring topic. For several years, Rahmon has made the country's energy security program one of the pillars of his policy, in particular with the construction of the Rogun dam. Is this project economically sustainable and should it be supported? Or do you think that the criticisms of it are appropriate, and if so, are there alternative ways to improve the country’s energy security?

I mentioned above the ongoing “ideologization” or “politicization” of sectors such as migration, religion, and education. This process has also impacted all industry, including energy. Building the Rogun Hydropower Plant as the region's largest hydroelectric plant and “achieving energy independence” is much less an economic program than it is an ideology and a slogan trumpeted by Rahmon over the last 20 years. For Rahmon, branding Rogun as “the biggest power plant” has been more important than economic, environmental, and long-term concerns. It is part of a trend of having the “biggest everything”: the biggest power plant, the tallest flag, the biggest teahouse, the biggest library, and so on.

Despite being a small country, Tajikistan has the 8th largest hydropower potential in the world. It could produce 500 billion megawatts of electricity annually and provide the whole region with environmentally friendly energy. However, due to Rahmon’s inappropriate economic policies, only 4% of this potential is exploited today. Reforms should be carried out as soon as possible to secure the country’s energy independence, first by focusing on the construction of small and medium-sized hydropower plants and second by putting an end to the government’s monopoly (which is the Rahmon family’s monopoly) in this sector, which the president has used as political and financial leverage.

The state-owned company Barqi Tojik, which is run by Rahmon’s family, controls the entire electricity sector of Tajikistan. It is the most indebted company in the country, with about
$3 billion of debt compared to the country's annual budget of $2.6 billion. However, no debt reports about this company are provided to the population and the private sector. The lack of transparency, widespread corruption, and the president's family's control over this electricity company have paralyzed the entire sector. Another essential step would be to stimulate competitiveness. Private capital, including from abroad, should be allowed to enter the sector. Moreover, investors should be granted sufficient autonomy to decide production quantities and sell electricity on domestic and foreign markets.

Yet I am very pessimistic about Rahmon's will to carry out reforms in this sector. In its current state, the energy sector is unable to attract private investments. No independent and serious financial institution is willing to invest in the Rogun Hydropower Plant, the development of which has been driven more by political concerns than by economic ones.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the particular weakness of Tajikistan's health system. What are the main issues with the healthcare system of your country, and what measures should be taken that are different from Rahmon's policy?

First, Rahmon hid the presence of the COVID-19 virus in the country for the first two months, which exacerbated a situation that was already difficult due to the weakness of the country's health system. Second, he held several crowded events, which contributed to the rapid spread of the virus. Third, unlike most countries in the region, Tajikistan did not adopt any specific policies to respond to the pandemic. No quarantine was implemented, no additional funds were allocated to the health sector and medical workers, and no special measures were taken to support entrepreneurs and the population.

Instead, Rahmon's policy has consisted of letting people get infected in order to achieve herd immunity. This has resulted in the deaths of many elderly people, even if they were diagnosed with “pneumonia” instead of coronavirus. To date, no reliable figures have been provided on the number of infections and deaths. Those released by the government—13,000 people infected and 90 deaths—are implausible. On January 15, 2021, Rahmon announced complete victory over coronavirus and declared Tajikistan coronavirus–free. Although the number of cases has decreased, this statement is unlikely to reflect reality. The vaccination process has not started and the government has not allocated any funds to purchase significant quantities of vaccines. Instead, Rahmon expects to get free vaccines, which might be a very lengthy process. Hence, a new global surge of the virus would likely provoke a new wave in the country.

Overcoming the consequences of Rahmon's policy and reforming the healthcare sector will be one of the greatest challenges for the future. Overall, the free universal healthcare guaranteed by legislation is not available, and corruption in this sector is widespread.
Moreover, today’s healthcare policy is based on a commercial rather than a preventive and healing rationale. Improving the situation will require reconsidering the healthcare philosophy and policy and prioritizing a program of reforms. Improving the healthcare system will be achieved through better management of human resources and healthcare infrastructure, and thanks to the capital brought by our country’s young population.

**Radicalization has sparked recurring debates in Central Asia, with some claiming that radicalization is a myth and others using fear-mongering rhetoric. Do you see radicalization as a risk in Tajikistan?**

I grew up in a religious environment, and all my academic and political activities have been related to religion. I have closely observed the radicalization of society during this period in all its aspects and stages. I think that religion itself has the lowest impact in the rise of religious radicalism in Tajikistan. Radicalization in our country results from repression and restrictions on the opposition, dissidents, and religious people, as well as from poor economic conditions, labor migration, and corruption. Even if Tajikistani people were not Muslim, a combination of these issues would certainly feed other forms of radicalization.

Yet since Tajik people are Muslim and familiar with religious slogans and values, religion is the most accessible and familiar way to protest. Until 2013-15—i.e., before our party was banned and other opposition groups were suppressed—there were fewer Tajikistanis in armed groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS than Kyrgyzstanis and Kazakhstanis.

Since then, however, the number of Tajikistanis who have joined these groups has increased sharply, with the result that a higher proportion of citizens of Tajikistan are now engaged in extremist movements than citizens of any other country outside the Arab world.

Moreover, the government has claimed to be the victim of radicalism and religious extremism to justify repression of its opponents and any potential rivals. However, in the long term, this process can end up harming everyone. I am convinced that by conducting a thoughtful religious policy in the country, religion can be transformed from a danger and security risk into a factor contributing to stability and development. We have the will, the program, and, most importantly, the experience to bring about this change.

**Do you think the peace agreement signed by Donald Trump and the Taliban is sustainable, and what does this mean for Tajikistan? Could Afghanistan still be a threat to Tajikistan and Central Asia?**

Trump’s agreement with the Taliban paves the way for next steps. However, unless the next serious steps are implemented by the new U.S. administration, the Taliban, and the
Afghan government, this agreement will be nothing more than a piece of paper. Achieving peace in this country is very important; ongoing instability and fragmentation in Afghanistan could have a negative impact on Tajikistan and the entire region.

On the other hand, leaders of Central Asian countries have overstated the impact of Afghanistan on the regional situation in order to achieve their political goals. First, although the threat of armed groups and of cross-border operations should not be ignored, no influential Afghan force—not even the Taliban—has any plans to extend the conflict beyond Afghanistan's borders. Second, the unstable domestic situation in Afghanistan would be unlikely to impact our country and the region if there were no domestic basis for such instability. In Tajikistan, risks of instability result from the domestic context, including unemployment, corruption, and restrictions on freedoms.

Another point of concern is that corrupt and authoritarian governments in the region have taken control over the channels for smuggling drugs, weapons, money, and gold, displacing transnational armed criminal groups. According to numerous reports, the president’s family and Tajik law enforcement agencies, in cooperation with some official and unofficial Afghan circles, have been involved in the illegal trade of drugs and weapons and the smuggling of precious stones and money on both sides of the border.

This cooperation is growing. In November 2020, millions of dollars and hundreds of kilograms of gold were seized at Dushanbe airport. Authorities in both countries tried to conceal this case, but more details were published in the media in February 2021, although the two countries provided different explanations and figures.

This nevertheless illustrates both countries’ authorities’ deep-rooted corruption and their engagement in large-scale transnational crime. Governments’ corruption and criminal connections also materialize in political complicity. After the seizure at the Dushanbe airport was publicly released, Chairman of the State Committee for National Security Yatimov paid two semi-official visits to Kabul. In a press conference, one of the Afghan security officials declared that the IRPT had some armed groups in his country, something that the Tajik authorities have been trying to prove for years. As explained by experts, the Afghan authorities' statement resulted from Yatimov's visits to address the money seized in Dushanbe. The Afghan and Tajikistani authorities’ cooperation in corruption and money laundering is as threatening to the region and the world as the risks related to armed groups.

Are China’s significant economic investments in Tajikistan and the Belt and Road Initiative a positive development factor for your country? Rahmon has been harshly criticized for the opacity of his policy toward Beijing, leading to Tajikistan’s growing indebtedness, and for China's political influence on Tajikistan’s economic and even
political autonomy. Do you think Rahmon's China policy should be revised, and if so, how?

China has conducted trade and economic policy in our country as it has in other weak and corrupt countries. This has consisted of giving loans in exchange for assets and privileges in economic infrastructure, subsoil resources, and market share. Corrupt governments receive money easily from Beijing, which has few scruples about transparency and efficiency. Tajikistan's engagement with China's global project, the Belt and Road Initiative, could be beneficial to our people. Thus far, however, this initiative has mainly benefited the Chinese government and Rahmon’s family, which is the main recipient of Chinese loans. The burden of the loans falls on every Tajikistani citizen, who sooner or later will have to help repay them.

However, Tajikistan’s excessive indebtedness to China, which constitutes 50% of its external debt, and the threat to our economic independence is due much less to Beijing than to Rahmon's policies, which have been designed to benefit the ruling family and its close associates. Any government that will follow Rahmon will need to have good economic, political, and security relations with China as a great neighbor, but these will need to serve the interests of the Tajikistani people. Moreover, the future government will have to reform its loan and economic policies and maintain a balance between its main partners so that that none of them can dominate our economy and politics.

Do you consider that relations with Russia as developed by Rahmon should be revised? Should Tajikistan join the Eurasian Economic Union?

Two years ago, I would have answered this question in the affirmative, even though the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is unlikely to be an influential and helpful regional union for Tajikistan. On the contrary, joining an economic union with countries that are completely corrupt and authoritarian may do more to cause damage than to bring political and economic benefits. Yet the EEU would have granted one million Tajikistani labor migrants in Russia the same privileges as Armenians and Kyrgyzstanis. However, this point is not relevant anymore; with the coronavirus pandemic and the sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West, Russia has become less attractive for our labor migrants.

Previously, Rahmon showed little interest in joining the Union, as the Russian economy has little to offer to the Union’s member states. There are two additional reasons why Rahmon is not willing to join the Union: 1) it would reduce China's presence and influence in Tajikistan, which both China and Rahmon are reluctant to accept; and 2) the sources of all goods and funds transferred to and from Tajikistan would have to be disclosed to all
member states of the Union, which would reveal the corrupt practices of the government of Tajikistan, especially the monopolistic practices and illegal business of Rahmon’s family.

You criticize the West. What changes are necessary in U.S. and European policy vis-à-vis Tajikistan? What do you expect from the West? Would you like more or less Western engagement?

I have said many times that we no longer have many expectations of Western countries. Western countries have done a lot to offer victims and opponents of dictatorial regimes safety and freedom by granting them asylum. However, changing the situation and dictatorial regimes in the region is not the responsibility of the US or European countries, but of our nation. Our only request to them is not to support the dictators of our region. Western countries might argue that economic, political, security, and technical relations with a country ruled by a dictator like Rahmon do not equate to endorsing him and his regime but contribute to the nation’s development. I would disagree. The use of double standards that divide dictators into “friends” and “foes” is a great support to them. For example, Rahmon is one of the world’s top 10 dictators; international organizations have rated him as more authoritarian than Putin and Lukashenko. The West has sanctioned the latter for cracking down on the opposition, human rights abuses, and authoritarian rule, which we appreciate; why is Rahmon not sanctioned and why is he invited to European capitals? This double standard is understood as Western support for Rahmon, who is already supported by China and Russia.

Some dictators are well-versed in how to pursue their brutal policies against their own nations while maintaining friendly relations with the West: 1) they don’t show themselves as strong leaders opposed to Western countries and Western values; and 2) they claim to be victims of terrorism and extremism and accuse their opponents of extremism or Islamism. The West tolerates them and considers them as relative “friends” whatever their harmful impact on the country, as it is a matter of “choice between bad and worse,” i.e., between bad dictatorial but secular governments, on the one hand, and worse “extremists,” on the other hand.

The West needs to be more assertive and deal with all dictators according to common standards. Not including Rahmon on the sanctions list simply because Tajikistan is situated in the Asian and Muslim part of the former Soviet Union, and not in the European part, means that the West, willingly or unwillingly, still does not consider our nation to deserve freedoms and rights in the way that Belarusians, Russians, Georgians, and others do.

The United States and Europe need to convince the people of our countries, including Tajikistan, that there are no double standards of “European and Asian,” “Christian and Muslim” in matters of human rights, democracy, and universal freedoms. This is all the more important as one of the “arguments” that extremist groups use to promote anti-
Western ideas among young people is Western countries’ indirect support for or indifference to the dictators of the region. I hope that the names of some of the worst human rights abusers in Tajikistan will soon be included on the U.S. and European sanctions lists.

**How could your party and other opposition parties have a real impact on the country? How do you think that opposition groups in exile can have a real impact within Tajikistan?**

The only way to exert influence within the country is to work with the media and social networks. We had to cut off direct contacts with our supporters and relatives in the country in order to save them from imprisonment and torture. We contact them only in exceptional cases. However, during the last two years, thanks to our work on social networks, we have been able to connect with many people in Tajikistan. These include not only ordinary people who wish to talk about their problems and social issues, but also experts, politicians, and even some government officials who send us information, express their opinion, and make recommendations. Our words and programs have therefore contributed to an intellectual debate within the country. Of course, we always had supporters inside the country, but they have been inactive lately. I am talking about new groups and audiences that used to be neutral or against us. Given the repression, people’s fears, and the high cost of Internet service and its low speed, a group of independent journalists decided to launch a satellite TV channel. In Tajikistan, TV has maintained a prominent role, unlike in many developed countries, where its impact has been reduced by the advent of the Internet.

The satellite TV channel is an expensive project but is cost-effective for the population, as most of the population in the region watch satellite TV. The Tajik government disrupted it on HOTBIRD satellite by hacking it after few months of activity, and efforts are being made to restore it.

According to our data, 70-80% of viewers of our Internet programs are labor migrants in Russia. Moreover, the majority of the population of Tajikistan is informed about our activities through labor migrants. In other words, Tajik migrants in Russia are not only our main audience, but also contribute to circulating our ideas and programs.

In the past, a contingent of labor migrants have fallen under the influence of extremist groups such as ISIS, especially since the government banned our party in the country. Over 90% of those who joined ISIS were labor migrants. Our goal is to address this issue by developing sustainable and moderate ideas and programs. At the same time, we send a message that we are determined to change the situation in the country and implement our political programs. Despite the ban on our party, we have been able to restore our relations with the Tajikistani people, and both migrants and people within the country
draw closer to us when we express our readiness to take responsibility domestically and release Tajikistan from its current situation of shock and numbness.