



## External Factors in Tajikistan's Democratization: The Role of the United States and Russia

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**Abstract:** *The role of the United States and Russia in Tajikistan can be favorable either for democracy or for authoritarian rule since the United States stood for democracy and Russia for authoritarian regime. The paper study the impact of the two big powers' engagement in Tajikistan on its democratization. It points out that their engagement has created an environment favorable for authoritarian regime rather than for democracy. It shows that while Russia has been successful in its mission of promoting and protecting authoritarian regime in Tajikistan, the United States fails to achieve success in its mission of promoting democracy in Tajikistan. Despite the fact that democracy constitutes one of the core objectives its engagement in Tajikistan, the United States gives more importance to geostrategic interest than promoting democracy. Also, the United States lacks the capacity to promoted democracy in Tajikistan due to lack of openness among the ruling elites and the presence of strong influence from Russia, a supporter and protector of authoritarian regime in post-Soviet space especially in Central Asia. Russia, a provider of a model of authoritarian regime to post-Soviet states space, has been serving as a supporter and protector of the authoritarian regime in Tajikistan from internal and external challenges especially through military and economic assistance.*

**Keywords:** democracy, authoritarianism, Islamic fundamentalist, geostrategic, security.

### Introduction

Tajikistan, unintentionally and unexpectedly, became independent in 1991 as a result of the breakup of Soviet Union. Having no experience of independence before, Tajikistan lacks almost everything that is needed for effective functioning of independent state. It lacks political, economic and military strength to function as independent state. As such, Tajikistan looks to foreign countries for assistance to all these requirements. This created a favorable condition for the United States and Russia, among others external powers, to engage in Tajikistan's political process through political, military and financial assistance. The engagement of these two big powers in Tajikistan can create a condition either favorable for democracy or authoritarian rule since the United States supports democracy while Russia supports for authoritarian rule. It is seen that the engagement of these two powers turned out to be favorable for authoritarian regime than for democracy. Both the United States and Russia had a role in this.

### The Role of the United States

The United States lacks genuine commitment to democracy promotion in Tajikistan. Democracy promotion constitutes a core objective of the United States' involvement in Tajikistan. Yet, this is not the only core objectives that the United States is pursuing in Tajikistan. Apart from this, the United States has been motivated by another core objective of 'geostrategic' interests. Remarkably, of these objectives, the United States has been giving precedence to geostrategic interest and democracy promoting is being pushed down to be only secondary concern: fighting Islamic fundamentalist, and in this case the Taliban in Afghanistan and preventing them in Tajikistan's border from spreading to other parts of the world, became top priority in United States' relation with Tajikistan. This prioritization of geostrategic interest emerged following the Islamic terrorist attack on the United States in 2001. This United States' war on Islamic fundamentalists, like never before, turns the United States- Tajikistan relations much closer. Yet, it brought very negative consequences on Tajikistan's democratization.

First, in return to Tajikistan's cooperation to the United States' war on Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, the United States was turning blind eye on Tajik government's authoritarian rule (Jonson 2006: 129, 133). The government's repressive practices towards the opposition leaders, pro-democratic NGOs and critical media has been increasing since then. Consequently, the government has been successful in sidelining or even eliminating potential opposition leaders from politics through political motivated cases. Also, it has been able to tame both the NGOs and independent media and prevent them from acting against the authoritarian practices of the government.

Secondly, the United States has been very fearful about the possible spill in of Islamic fundamentalists from Afghanistan to Tajikistan, to Central Asia, and then to other parts of the world. For this reason, it strongly felt the need for strong and stable government in Tajikistan that would be capable of preventing the penetration of Islamic rule from Afghanistan. The government in Tajikistan though authoritarian was capable of preventing the penetration of Islamic fundamentalists from Afghanistan. Consequently, the United States was relatively satisfied with Tajik



authoritarian government, and wanted it to remain rather than dismantling it. It fears that replacing the government or the president with a new and inexperienced leader might disturb the existing stability and fail to prevent Islamic rule that may spill in from Afghanistan, the main concern of the United States (Foroughi 2011: 537, Uzayr 2013, Parshin 2013).

### The Role of Russia

Russian has been playing more significant role than any other states in promoting authoritarian rule in Tajikistan. Mainly, it promotes and protects Tajik authoritarian government through military cooperation and economic assistance.

Russia has been serving as a provider of security to Tajikistan from internal unrest and external pressure since its independence. During the civil war the Russian army guarded the Tajik-Afghan border to check the penetration of opposition from their hide outs in Afghanistan and also fought against the opposition with the government side by side (Nygen 2007: 189). In the absence of a standing army of its own, the military assistance provided by the Russian army proved extremely helpful for Rahmon's regime to survive in the face of strong opposition forces. In fact, it was the assistance of Russia that enabled Rahmon to remain in power throughout these trouble times of the civil war (Shoemaker 2014: 283).

In 2005, alarmed by the event of Tulip Revolution, President Rahmon quickly rushed to Russia for assistance. Russia assured its military assistance to deal with mass protest in case it occur in Tajikistan as in Kyrgyzstan, thereby serving once again as the protector of Rahmon's authoritarian regime. This support from Russia emboldened the ruling regime in its attempt to preserve authoritarian regime (Jonson 2006: 147). Also at the backdrop of mass unrest in Middle East countries of Libya and Syria, Russia's concern for the stability of Rahmon's regime and efforts towards that end continued. In September 2011, military drills under the banner

"Tsent-2011" was organised by members of CSTO which was designed to prepare the participating states or Tajikistan in particular to respond mass unrest similar to Libya and Syria, and possible spill of instability from Afghanistan after the withdrawal of NATO forces (Marat 2011).

In the economic field, Russia is assisting Tajikistan through the engagement of constructions of large dam and heavy industries, and also in providing jobs to Tajik immigrants in Russia. It offers economic privileges and carries out investments especially in the hydropower sector (Uzayr 2013). For instance, the 670-megawatt Sangtuda-1 hydroelectric plant that generates around 10 % of Tajikistan's electricity output was officially opened in 2009 with Russia's collaboration. The Russian gas giant Gazprom also has agreed with Tajikistan to develop various joint venture gas fields in Tajikistan. Russia also contributed in Tajikistan's economy in a big way by providing jobs to millions plus Tajik migrant workers in Russia. According to 2011 World Bank report the money sent by Tajik migrant workers constituted 47% of the national GDP (Uzayr 2013).

### Conclusion

The influence of Russia, the colonial master of Tajikistan and a staunch supporter of authoritarian regime, remained strong and stable in Tajikistan which to a great extent promotes and strengthens authoritarian rule in Tajikistan. By contrast, the United States lacks strong historical, political and economic ties with Tajikistan as Russia did. Its mission to promote democracy has frequently been overshadowed by its concern for geopolitics added by lack capability to promote democracy. Thus, the combinations of the lack of interest and lack of capability on the part of the US to influence Tajikistan's politics on the one hand, and the continued dominant influence of Russia on the other hand, allows the ruling regime in Tajikistan to abandon democratic reforms and incline towards authoritarian rule.

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