

## **Small Tajik Parties Form Bloc**

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Major opposition parties indicate they won't join coalition in case it damages their special relationship with regime.

Two political parties in Tajikistan have formed a coalition to fight the 2005 parliamentary election, but the two main opposition forces - Islamic and Communist - are steering clear of it because they think they stand a better chance if they go it alone, analysts say.

The Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party sealed their pact on November 3, forming the Coalition for Transparent and Fair Elections.

It is the first time that Tajik parties have formed an election bloc since a 1997 peace deal ended the five years of civil war and the country embarked on a gradual process of reconciliation and political stabilisation.

President Imomali Rahmonov and his team remain very much in control of the country. He strengthened his position in June this year, in a referendum which granted him the right to stand for two further terms in office. This could potentially mean he stays in office until 2020 - and he has been in power since 1992.

The pro-Rahmonov People's Democratic Party, PDP, is the dominant party, winning just under half the seats in parliament in the last general election, held in 2000. But many observers see it as a vehicle for the president and his supporters, rather than a strong party with an agenda of its own.

Unlike its neighbours, Tajikistan allows opposition parties to exist and to stand in elections. The Islamic Revival Party, IRP, is one of the most important, since it spearheaded the guerrilla war against Rahmonov's government until 1997. But after its thousands of men were demobilised in the peace deal, it failed to expand as a political force and won just 7.5 per cent of the vote in the 2000 election, giving it only two seats in parliament.

The Communist Party did rather better, winning 20 per cent compared with the PDP's 65 per cent.

The Democrats and Social Democrats are among the smaller opposition parties, although their leaders, Mahmadrusi Iskandarov and Rahmatillo Zoirov respectively, are men of some political stature. The Democratic Party came in just under the five per cent threshold in the last election, and consequently has no seats in parliament. The Social Democrats fared worse.

The Democrats were an important party in the early Nineties, spearheading the movement for Tajik independence. Driven out when Rahmonov's faction won the first round of the civil war, the party became a junior partner in the IRP-led political and military resistance.

The decision of just two small parties to team up is disappointing for those who hoped the opposition would be able to build a broad coalition to challenge the president's party. The possibility that such a grouping would emerge has been hotly debated in Tajikistan in recent months.

Parviz Mullojonov, a leading independent political scientist, says the reason that only two parties formed a

coalition is that they are the ones that will benefit most from it. Apart from their shared liberal centrist views, they need to win the minimum five per cent of the vote to get seats in parliament.

"They have virtually no other choice but to unite their pre-election efforts," he told IWPR, adding that they might be joined later by a third group, the Socialist Party, which is in a similar position.

According to journalist L. Saidova, neither party has more than 3,500 members, a tiny figure compared with the Communists' 60,000 and the PDP's 80,000 or more.

One of the new coalition's priorities is to lobby for changes to Tajikistan's election laws, which the parties feel is designed to exclude them from power. Social Democrats' deputy chairman, Shokirjon Hakimov, says the coalition is the only way to address the issue of fair elections. The 2000 election was criticised by international observers, who identified some vote-rigging and a lack of transparency.

Political parties in Tajikistan are still at an early stage of development. One problem is that their support-bases reflect the country's regional differences, which were accentuated by the civil war. For example, Rahmonov's power base remains the southern region of Kulyab, while the Islamic party is strongest in the mountains east of Dushanbe. Parties do not entirely lack support outside their home ground, but they tend to be weaker there.

The fragility of political forces was underlined when some Democratic Party members voiced public hostility to Iskandarov's deal with the Social Democrats, because they felt that announcing an opposition bloc would place them in too direct a confrontation with President Rahmonov.

The coalition will face problems in carving out political space of its own since - unlike the Islamists and the Communists - its political ideology appears superficially similar to that of the PDP: a secular state, liberal values, market economics, and a mildly left-of-centre focus on social welfare issues. The main difference is that while the PDP represents Rahmonov's entourage and establishment, they largely attract intellectuals who would like to be involved in government, but have been marginalised by Rahmonov's "in-crowd".

The two larger parties seemed to have ruled out joining the coalition, for the moment at least. Communist leader Shodi Shabdolov said that given the ideological differences involved, his party would not be taking part.

Reactions from the IRP were more ambivalent. Deputy party chairman Muhiddin Kabiri, who is viewed as a pragmatist, said the Islamists might join this kind of coalition for tactical purposes. But party leader Sayed Abdullo Nuri announced that the IRP would go forward to the next election with an economic programme of its own. Observers read this as meaning the party would be standing on its own.

Abdughani Mamadazimov, who heads the National Association of Political Scientists and works closely with all political parties, believes the IRP and the Communists feel no pressure to join a bloc because they are sure of winning parliamentary seats anyway.

Mullojonov thinks the Islamists also recognise that if they started forming coalitions, voters might be worried because they remember the days when the IRP was the leading force in the militarised United Tajik Opposition. "An attempt by the IRP to join a broad coalition would make many people alarmed about the party. It is obvious that they are not interested in this happening," he said.

Although it is poorly represented in parliament, the IRP has the advantage of holding some posts in government, a legacy of the 1997 peace deal which gave it a share of power.

As things stand, the IRP and the Communists are in a position to maintain an informal dialogue with Rahmonov's administration, and to act as opposition parties without really rocking the boat, says Mullojonov. This keeps the international community happy, too, since it creates an impression of stability - something that is important given Tajikistan's violent recent history.

So what remains is a paradoxical situation. The Islamic and Communist parties, with political agendas that differ radically from Rahmonov's, maintain a constructive relationship with his administration - and in the IRP's case retain some government posts. And the much smaller coalition of Democrats and Social Democrats - which are much closer to the PDP in ideological outlook but are excluded from power - will be seen as the opposition.

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