

Tajik Coalition Tearing at the Seams

Author: [Zafar Abdullaev](#)

Opposition parties run into legal difficulties, making their election chances even slimmer.

Centrist opposition parties in Tajikistan have come under pressure as the authorities strike leading figures from the ballot list, reducing further the parties' chances of performing well at the forthcoming general election.

In the second of a series of articles on the parties competing for the February 27 election, IWPR focuses on the plight of two of the four members of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, set up last year to provide the opposition with a united platform.

The Democratic Party, a key member of the coalition, has been effectively decapitated with its leader Mahmadrusi Iskandarov facing extradition and arrest. The smaller Social Democratic Party is in trouble, too, after agreeing to work with an unregistered political party.

The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections was formed at the end of May 2004, and initially included the Social Democrats, the Socialist Party and the Islamic Rebirth Party, IRP. The Democratic Party joined later, after Iskandarov voiced anger at changes to the law, which he said discriminated against smaller parties.

The Democrats have been forced to take their chairman Iskandarov off the candidate list after a January 15 ruling from the Central Electoral Commission, CEC, refusing to register him because he was facing extradition at the request of Tajik state prosecutors. CEC chairman Mirzoali Boltuev told reporters that people suspected of serious crimes cannot stand for parliament.

Iskandarov was arrested in Moscow on December 10, and if sent back to Tajikistan will face an array of charges including embezzlement, attempted murder and terrorism. His supporters say the charges have been fabricated as a way of isolating him politically. The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections quickly issued a statement condemning the arrest and demanding that "the authorities cease persecuting and pressuring coalition members".

The Democrats are probably the third strongest opposition group after the Communists, who are not part of the coalition, and the IRP. During the 1992-97 civil war, the Democrats were a minor partner in the United Tajik Opposition, a guerrilla force led by the IRP.

Next comes the Social Democratic Party, a smaller party which says it has no more than 4,500 members, compared with the 10,000 claimed by the Democrats and 15,000 in the Socialist Party. Some experts believe the Social Democrats' figures are the only accurate ones. As party leader Rahmatullo Zoirov, a former adviser to President Imomali Rahmonov, has said, "our party does not aim for quantity; it's quality that is important to us".

Last week the party suffered a setback when it had to drop one of its highest-profile candidates.

In December the Social Democrats agreed to include five members of the Taraqqiyot party plus its leader Sulton Quvvatov on its own list of projected candidates. The government has repeatedly denied Taraqqiyot (Development) the right to register as a legal political party, so it cannot contest the election independently.

On January 12, the Social Democrats had to strike out Quvvatov's name after being warned that he was accused of a criminal offence.

"We were forced to remove Quvvatov's candidacy after we received a letter from the security ministry and the prosecutor's office saying he was suspected of committing a crime," said party chairman Zoirov.

Quvvatov is charged with "insulting the honour and dignity of the president", plus other offences such as inciting extremism and ethnic hostility.

The charges appear to relate to plans by Taraqqiyot to appeal to the International Court of Justice in The Hague over the government's refusal to grant it registration. The letter containing the appeal - which was never actually sent - was seized by the security service in a raid on the party's office last August, and Quvvatov's deputy Rustam Faiziev, who drafted the document, was arrested.

The removal of Iskandarov and Quvvatov looks like part of a concerted campaign to weaken their parties and reduce their chances of doing well in the election. Opposition parties have complained of harassment and marginalisation in the last few years, but recent examples of regime change in Ukraine and Georgia may have focused the authorities' minds on the issue.

"The arrest of well-known political leaders in Tajikistan, the refusal to register the Taraqqiyot party, and also the closure of the opposition newspaper Ruzi Nav, show that there are people in the government who have been worried by events in Georgia and Ukraine, and fear that they may be repeated in Tajikistan," said Michael Hall, the International Crisis Group's representative in Dushanbe.

Hall ruled out the possibility of a Tajik version of the "velvet revolutions" seen elsewhere. "Tajikistan's situation is different from the situation in Georgia and Ukraine," he said. "There is no figure similar to Saakashvili or Yuschenko in Tajikistan who could pose serious competition for President Imomali Rahmonov."

Apart from government interference, many opposition parties in Tajikistan suffer from weak party organisation and a lack of nationwide, grassroots support. That partly explains why the Social Democrats were prepared to adopt their Taraqqiyot colleagues as candidates, as well as several embarrassing cases where people have been nominated as opposition party candidates without their knowledge.

Another symptom of the problem is that a number of candidates have had to withdraw because they could not afford the 800 US dollar deposit. These included four of the five Taraqqiyot members left standing on the Social Democrat list after Quvvatov's removal.

Still, opposition figures are publicly optimistic that their parties will do well if only the elections are reasonably free and fair.

"It's likely that three Social Democratic candidates on the party list and two in single-mandate constituencies will get into parliament as long as the standards of Tajikistan's electoral legislation are upheld, and there is no falsification during the election," said the party's deputy head Shokirjon Hakimov. Shortly after he made the remark, his own candidacy ran into trouble, and he accused local election officers of obstructing his right to stand.

The IRP's deputy leader Muhiddin Kabiri gave a less sanguine prediction, "Presidents in Central Asian

countries don't just give up power like that.”

Zafar Abdullaev is an independent journalist in Dushanbe.

Location: Tajikistan
Georgia

Focus: Central Asia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajik-coalition-tearing-seams>