

Tajik Communists Hark Back to Brighter Past

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Soviet-era party can still pull out the voters, but has long ceased to be a force to be reckoned with.

Fourteen years after Soviet rule ended, Tajikistan's Communist Party is still a going concern that looks forward to retaining its position as the second most important parliamentary party in the forthcoming general election.

Despite maintaining a faithful and, it claims, growing constituency, the party gains much of its appeal not by offering a better future, but by recalling a more prosperous past. It also survives by taking a non-confrontational stance, aligning itself closer to the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, PDPT, the party of President Imomali Rahmonov, than to the opposition.

In the fifth in a series of articles on Tajikistan's political parties, IWPR spoke to supporters and party officials to find out what the enduring appeal of the Communists is.

The last parliamentary election held in 2000 gave the Communists an impressive 20 per cent of the vote, although this landed them just five seats in parliament (they have since won three more in by-elections).

The PDPT got 15 of the 63 seats in the lower house, but in reality has more since it has close links with many of the 18 deputies who hold seats earmarked for independents. The only other party represented in parliament is the Islamic Rebirth Party, IRP, which won two seats last time.

There is not a lot that separates the Communists from the PDPT in terms of ideological rhetoric – both parties talk about social justice, state-funded healthcare and education, and the right to employment. And when the ruling party has overseen market reforms including privatisation at the prompting of foreign lenders, the Communists - who still back the idea of a state-managed economy - have generally acquiesced.

What sets the two apart is history. The PDPT represents those former Communists who came out of the tumultuous power-struggle of 1991-92 as a new Tajik ruling elite, whose military forces then engaged the opposition including the IRP in what became a five-year civil war.

By contrast, those who remained within the Communist Party benefit from being associated not so much with the civil war, but with the Soviet period. As the system was disintegrating at the end of the Eighties, many people held the party to blame for the decades of oppression. But seen at a distance, and compared with the bloodshed, infrastructure collapse and steep economic decline that Tajikistan went on to experience in the Nineties, the USSR is now remembered fondly as a time when Moscow provided government subsidies, jobs, universal education and healthcare for this small Soviet republic.

It's an appealing image in a country where so little works properly, and where poverty is endemic.

"Back when the Communists were in power, health and transport were free for the elderly, and you could live decently on a pension and not have to beg in the street," said Zulfia Khojaeva, a resident of Dushanbe who, as a pensioner, remembers the old days and plans to vote for the Communists in the hope they might resurrect some of these benefits.

However, party leader Shodi Shabdolov insists that the Communists are not reliant on the nostalgia vote. He told IWPR that many supporters are young people, and that only one in five is of pension age, "Anyone who thinks our party is getting older every year or that there are only pensioners left in it is sorely mistaken. The ranks of our party are getting younger."

Khurshed Hasanov, an 18-year-old student from Dushanbe, is a convert to the Communist cause, and is just the kind of voter Shabdolov wants to win over.

"I know that in the past there were equal and free opportunities for all young people to receive a good education, but now only the sons of rich businessmen or officials get these privileges," said Hasanov. "No one in Tajikistan is currently interested in what young people are doing. They are effectively abandoned to the mercy of fate, and if you want to escape from poverty and ignorance, you need either a lot of money or good connections."

According to its leader, the Communist Party enjoys widespread support. Its claimed membership of 55,000 places it second only to the PDPT.

In a country where regional allegiances matter, Shabdolov says the Communists enjoy majority support in the capital itself and in the Hissar valley which runs west from Dushanbe and includes the important industrial centre of Tursunzade. The party has about 50 per cent support in much of the northern Soghd region including the main city Khojand; in and around the south-western town of Kurgan-Tyube; and in the remote south-eastern highlands of Badakhshan. That leaves the eastern mountain valleys to the Islamic Rebirth Party, and the PDPT in control of its stronghold in the southeast, Kulyab and neighbouring areas.

But despite this level of support and its undoubted success in the last election, the Communist Party has been unable to field more than nine candidates nationwide this time, so that even if they were all to win, they would still be in the minority in parliament

Shabdolov's explanation is that the party lacks the cash to put up more nominations and run election campaigns. "Unfortunately, we do not have wealthy party members, businessmen or farmers who could help us out financially," he said. "Once, our party had plenty of money and property. Now it's all been nationalised."

In a controversial move, the government increased the deposit payable by candidates to 800 US dollars last year.

However the party performs in the February 27 election, few expect it to start pursuing a more vigorous line. Some say the Communists' ambivalent role as a non-opposition party leaves them overshadowed and increasingly redundant, as it is their former colleagues now in the PDPT who make the running.

"These days the people in power are former communists. The only difference is that now they are members of the president's party, but their ideology has hardly changed at all," said Isroil Ismoilov, a former lecturer now on a pension.

Political scientist Rashid Abdullo sees the Communists playing a waning role in the current political environment. "The Communist Party has lost its ability to work independently," he said. "The good qualities of the Communists were only visible when the party ruled and dominated, but it is not capable of fighting in the harsh conditions of political competition. This may explain why many of its members have moved to other parties... such as the PDPT.

“Its enormous success lies in its loyalty of the current regime, not confrontation.”

But nostalgia for times past may just be enough to call out the Communist vote on election day, so that the party maintains a position in parliament, albeit a fairly inert one.

Sodat Olimova, a sociologist at the scientific research centre Sharq, believes Tajik society is essentially conservative, saying, “Because of tradition... young people in Tajikistan do not dare reject the achievements of their fathers and grandfathers. Many even cite historical facts - the Tajik people did not have a territory of their own for centuries, and it was only under the Communists that a separate republic of Tajikistan was formed.”

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Location: Tajikistan

Focus: Central Asia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajik-communists-hark-back-brighter-past>