

Tajik Election Campaign Falls Flat

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Behind the scenes there is talk of plots to split the opposition and curb the media, but on the surface the campaign is muted.

The prevailing mood of the campaigning for the Tajik presidential election is downbeat, but this is deceptive – the superficial calm conceals intrigue and high emotions in the world of politics. However, none of this really matters to the average voter, who already knows what the result will be.

No one is in any doubt who will win on November 6. None of the four contenders standing against the incumbent Imomali Rahmonov has the political weight to offer a serious challenge, while the major opposition parties cannot or will not field candidates.

The other candidates have avoided confrontation with Rahmonov and instead of seeking national media coverage to promote themselves, they are spending their time touring the length and breadth of country. While it is a departure for Tajik election candidates to make such an effort to meet voters in remote areas, the impact of their individual campaigns may be reduced by the fact that they are all traveling together on the same tour bus.

The candidates are not expected to make use of the free airtime granted to them until just five days before the election, and none of their campaign speeches is expected to be inspiring. Meanwhile, the state media have been giving extensive coverage to the president's daily official activities and carrying reports highlighting his administration's achievements.

If the election campaigning is unexciting, there is plenty going on under the surface. The haste with which the Central Electoral Commission approved the candidate nominations raised some eyebrows, since there was some doubt that any of them – apart from Communist Party leader Ismail Talbakov – could really have gathered the 160,000 signatures required.

Two others, Amir Karakulov of the Agrarian Party and Olimjon Boboev of the Economic Reforms Party, are little-known academics rather than politicians, and belong to parties set up only last year. Some observers believe their presence on the candidate list was deliberately engineered to create the appearance of pluralism.

Then there is Abduhalim Gafforov of the Socialist Party – or rather, part of the Socialist Party. Again, the schism in the party and Gafforov's emergence as a candidate have been seen as an attempt to weaken the opposition. Mirhusein Narziev, who still leads the original and much larger Socialist Party faction, was also planning to stand in the presidential ballot but was not allowed to enter his name, as the justice ministry does not recognise his party as legal.

Another hopeful, Tabarali Ziyoev, was also the product of a party split. The Democratic Party, whose leader Mahmudruzi Iskandarov is serving a long prison term, is boycotting the election because it believes it will be neither free nor fair. But in late September the government suddenly decided that Iskandarov's people were not the real Democratic Party after all, and instead recognised an offshoot that emerged earlier this year called Vatan.

Ziyoev was Vatan's chosen candidate, and like Gafforov, could have been expected to win official approval. But the election commission rejected him, presumably because he did not even come close to getting the

requisite number of signatures.

A bizarre consequence of the schism within the Democrats is that both factions now produce their own weekly newspapers, each called Adolat (Justice) and each claiming to be the genuine article.

Finally, the Islamic Rebirth Party has simply opted out of this election, even though it is the most important of the true opposition parties. It is not even boycotting the vote, like Iskandarov's Democrats or the smaller Social Democratic Party, but simply standing aside because of concerns about electoral legislation. Its leader Muhiddin Kabiri has also made it clear the party does not want to risk exposing itself to accusations that it is pursuing an anti-democratic Islamic agenda.

As a result of all this, the opposition will not figure at all in the rest of the campaign or on election day.

"The opposition has lost this election," said political scientist Rustam Haidarov told IWPR. "They have been too involved in internal restructuring of their parties and in internecine strife and schism."

With the election already in the bag, Rahmonov's government might have been expected to take a fairly relaxed attitude to any criticism it faced in the run-up to the vote. However, it apparently decided that it was better to be safe than sorry. A month before the ballot, the authorities blocked access to a number of internet sites, arguing that they were detrimental to national security.

The communications ministry's regulatory body instructed all domestic internet providers to block the access to five websites, three of which - www.charogiruz.ru, www.arianastorm.com and www.tajikistantimes.ru - carry opposition material critical of the authorities, while two others, www.ferghana.ru and www.centrasia.ru, report news from across Central Asia.

The regulatory agency argued that the offending websites worked to "subvert government policy on information" and posed a security threat.

Apart from the state-run internet provider, there are another 12 commercial provider firms, which were given ten days to carry out the order.

Mahmud Saraev, an official in Rahmonov's administrative office, argued that the authorities were within their rights to restrict access to these sites, all of which are based abroad. "They are deliberately seeking to distort the facts at this [election] time," he told IWPR. "They fling mud at the government and fill their sites with libellous material."

Dodojon Atavulloev, the exiled journalist behind both Tajikistan Times and Charogi Ruz, complained, "In the run-up to the election, the authorities don't want the people of Tajikistan to know what's going on in their own country."

Domestic and international media rights groups said the government's decision was a breach of free speech and civil liberties.

"No one has the right to make a judgement about whether material undermines the state. Only the courts can do that," said Nuriddin Karshibaev who heads the National Association of Independent Media. "The government official behind this move meant to do the president and government a service, but it backfired."

Private internet providers complied with the order well before the ten-day deadline was up. But the order appears to have been quietly dropped, and the "banned" websites are now available in Tajikistan again.

Meanwhile, the streets of the capital Dushanbe are filling up with election posters even if the candidates themselves – Rahmonov apart – are all but invisible.

However, few of the potential voters are reading the flyers, and they seem distinctly uninterested in the contest.

"I'll pop in and vote, but I know it will be pointless," said resident Nadira Davlatova. "Election or not, it's clear who the president will be."

If voters express any preference, it is often for Rahmonov, who is credited with maintaining the peace since the end of a bloody civil war ended in 1997. His is also the only familiar face.

"I'm going to vote for Rahmonov," said a casual labourer at a city market. "I don't know the others. I don't have the time to read about their programmes – I've got to earn a living. I won't be watching [TV political broadcasts] either. Why bother?"

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