

A Tale of Two Presidents

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Tajik leader's attempt to carve out a reputation as an international statesman is unlikely to impress the country's impoverished population.

His experience and influence are being applauded on the world stage, but back home in Tajikistan, President Imomali Rakhmonov's people are only interested in how he will resolve the country's social and economic crises.



(left to right) **Leader of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan Said Abdullo Nuri; Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov.**
Photo by Sergey Zhukov.

His country remains the poorest of the Central Asian republics and five years of peace have done little to improve the lives of its citizens. No matter how glittering his international career may become, the latter are unlikely to be impressed until factories reopen and the nation's education and health care systems are overhauled.

Rakhmonov's rise to prominence was a surprise result of the September 11 attacks on America. The international community was reminded that Tajikistan had long opposed extremism in neighbouring Afghanistan, regularly calling for action against the terrorist bases there.

Tajikistan was among the first to offer its military bases, airfields and airspace for humanitarian operations, while not ruling out the possibility of military use.

Rakhmonov is now fond of reminding the Tajik public that he was one of the first leaders to spot the danger.

"All my speeches pointed out that Afghanistan threatened not only Tajikistan but the entire civilised world. I called upon the international community to tackle the problem, but unfortunately the voice of reason was not heard," he told a Dushanbe conference on June 18. "Only the terrorist attacks on the United States prompted the world to take action."

Even political opponents such as the Tajikistan Islamic Revival Party, formerly the backbone of the old United Tajik Opposition, have been forced to admit that the president's international currency has risen significantly since September 11.

"Rakhmonov has certainly become more respected in the world because he understands global issues, and more importantly because he saw the threat coming from Afghanistan," said its press secretary Khikmatullo Saifullozoda.

Political scientist Rashid Abdullo points out that the mass media has played a large part in building the president's image by focusing on the US-led war against terrorism. Rakhmonov's role in that conflict has reminded many observers of the part he played in bringing Tajikistan's 1992-97 civil war to an end.

This experience has since been brought to bear in the conflict between Pakistan and India over the disputed territory of Kashmir. Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf made an official visit to Tajikistan on June 2, the day before a conference on confidence building between Asian countries began in Almaty.

Rakhmonov talked about his experience of settling the Tajik conflict, gave advice and called on both sides to solve the conflict through peaceful means. He also held a meeting with the Indian prime minister during the Almaty summit. Commentators regard the timing of Musharraf's visit - which came as Pakistan and India stood on the brink of nuclear war - as a measure of the Tajik president's growing influence.

The president's reputation has not passed unnoticed in neighbouring countries. The largest Central Asian republic, Uzbekistan, has traditionally had an uneasy relationship with Tajikistan but has now invited Rakhmonov to make an official visit to Tashkent at the end of the year.

However, these events cannot disguise Tajikistan's ongoing domestic problems. "There is a serious socio-economic crisis in this country. People are receiving salaries of one or two US dollars, which is terrible. Not everyone here is thrilled with the government and the president," Tajikistan's Communist Party chairman Shodi Shabdolov told IWPR.

Rakhmonov's newfound status is yet to be translated into increased aid and investment as once hoped, and Abdullo warns that while the president will always be praised for his part in ending the civil war, he must now concentrate on improving living standards. "Young people now don't remember the war, for

them the most important thing is the normal economic development of the country," he said.

At the moment, the population has no real alternative to its president and he is well aware of that fact. Observers are now warning Rakmonov, a former director of a Soviet-era agricultural collective, not to neglect his domestic duties.

Vladimir Davlatov is the pseudonym of a journalist in Tajikistan

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