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Cavan, Susan

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Boston University
Newly Independent States: Central Asia

By Monika Shepherd

TAJIKISTAN

Tajik ruling party loses seats in parliamentary election

On February 28, elections were held to fill all 63 seats in Tajikistan’s lower house of parliament, the Majlisi Namoyandagon, for another five year term. (1) Although the overall winner was, as usual, a foregone conclusion, the fact that this time four other parties managed to pass the 5% threshold, depriving the ruling People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) of at least eight seats, was a less predictable outcome. (2) Of course, critics will point out that only two of the parties in the new parliament’s structure can be considered real opposition parties, the Communist Party and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The Agrarian Party and the Economic Development Party, both of which were formed in 2006, generally support the PDPT’s (and therefore also President Emomali Rahmon’s) policies and are considered to be merely pro-government props by some analysts. (3) And, also as per usual, government authorities interfered in the campaign and polling process in most of the tried and true ways, in order to assure a decisive PDPT victory. Nonetheless, the fact that the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER) not only permitted some degree of competition in many electoral districts, but did not insist on a total PDPT sweep of the elections signifies at least slight progress. In other Central Asian countries, opposition candidates rarely even appear on the electoral ballot, much less conduct public campaigns critical of the ruling administration’s party. Thus, the results of Tajikistan’s recent election, even if flawed, represent at least a small step in the right direction.
Not surprisingly, opposition party leaders are deeply dissatisfied with the results of the February poll and have alleged that its results are fraudulent. Two weeks prior to the election, IRPT Press Secretary Shamsiddin Said announced that his party had submitted over 50 complaints to the prosecutor's general office, to the courts and to the CCER, regarding campaign violations carried out by government authorities. (4) Following the CCER's release of the preliminary election figures, IRPT chair Muhiddin Kabiri, Communist Party leader Shoddi Shabdolov, Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) chair Rahmatullo Zoirov, as well as the leaders of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) and Socialist Party all publicly accused the CCER of perpetrating election fraud. The SDPT, DPT and the Socialist Party’s candidates failed to garner 5% of the vote and thus were shut out of parliament entirely. Kabiri was particularly harsh in his criticism of the election outcome, calling it a “farce,” and further stating: “The president's promise to hold free elections was trampled away at these polls, which were accompanied by mass violations of the election law.” The IRPT chair based his allegations of fraud partially on the fact that during the 2005 elections, when his party was considerably smaller and less organized, its candidates managed to poll at least 10% of the total vote, as opposed to the 7.7% that they ostensibly received in the most recent poll. Kabiri also stated that in addition to challenging the election results in court, his party may undertake other types of public protest, such as hunger strikes or demonstrations. (5)

Zoirov echoed the IRPT chair’s comments, roundly condemning the election process: “the elections were neither democratic not transparent, while fraud in vote-counting reached an unprecedented proportion.” He accused the CCER of interfering in the ballot-casting and committing ballot fraud. Communist Party leader Shoddi Shabdolov, whose party finished behind the IRPT, concurred, calling the elections “unfair, a parody.” (6) International observers from the OSCE and from the US Embassy in Dushanbe fully supported the opposition leaders’ allegations of election fraud. OSCE monitors noted “serious irregularities on election day, including a high prevalence of family and proxy
voting and cases of ballot box stuffing,” (7) while US embassy observers gave an even harsher assessment of the election process. US monitors noted numerous campaign violations by state officials, including an obvious bias toward PDPT candidates, as well as a wide range of ballot box fraud. (8) Following tradition, Russian, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and CIS observers praised the vote as exemplifying democratic standards. However, given the fact that they have yet to criticize any Central Asian election, their evaluations carry little weight.

All in all, Tajikistan’s recent parliamentary elections have received abysmal grades both domestically and internationally and this makes the PDPT’s loss of even a few seats even more astonishing. Equally surprising is the fact that CCER officials permitted the IRPT to poll ahead of the Communist Party, even if by only a few points. The IRPT, by virtue of the fact that it has an Islamic element and led the United Tajik Opposition in Tajikistan's 1992-1997 civil war, often has borne the brunt of government officials’ various initiatives to suppress and marginalize political opposition movements. Although it is unlikely that with only two seats the IRPT will be able to influence any of parliament’s decisions, it cannot be denied that the party has gained popular support, a fact supported by the CCER’s version of the election results, flawed or not. The real question, now, is how the IRPT intends to capitalize on its newfound post-war popularity.

President Rahmon has not coped well with the many socioeconomic adversities that have beset his citizens, choosing to continue implementing the same corrupt and ineffective measures which have been crippling his country since he first took office. While it is no doubt true that many of his constituents tolerate his greed and ineptitude because his government has maintained peace and relative stability, as Tajikistan’s energy and fiscal crises continue to worsen, the IRPT and/or other opposition parties may gain sufficient public support to challenge Rahmon’s reign.
Newly Independent States: Western Region
By Tammy Lynch

Azarov tackles women and gas
Ukraine’s government got down to work this week – and what a week it was.

President Viktor Yanukovych replaced 14 heads of regional administrations, reopened negotiations with the IMF, and offered to sell part of Ukraine’s gas transport pipeline system to Gazprom. (1) In addition, while actively supporting his president in these endeavors, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov also threatened Kyiv Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky with “stringent measures” if he does not
“improve the situation” in the virtually bankrupt capital, (2) and spent considerable time congratulating himself for being …. male.

In fact, responding to criticism of his all male cabinet, the 62-year-old Azarov suggested, “With all respect to women, conducting reforms is not women’s business” because men can work with “no breaks or weekends.” (3)

The comment follows on Yanukovych’s claim during the presidential campaign that his opponent Yulia Tymoshenko would be better off in the kitchen.

Azarov’s latest statement would come as a surprise to Tymoshenko, who, as prime minister, became known for her unyielding work ethic. Undoubtedly, Yanukovych’s own top parliamentary ally (and campaign spokesperson) Hanna Herman also would disagree. But the comments do perhaps explain Herman’s surprising absence from the cabinet.

Regardless, Azarov’s comments sparked a series of small but headline-grabbing protests by Ukraine’s nascent, pseudo-feminist organization, Femen. In a statement, the group suggested, “People with such archaic views on women … have no right to hold leadership positions.” (4) Then, in what appears to be an odd attempt to underscore the point, Femen requested “the wives, girlfriends, and all females close to government ministers to declare a sex boycott of cabinet members in protest against the impudent and humiliating treatment of Ukrainian women.” (5) There is, of course, no way to monitor accurately whether this boycott is being carried out, but the group clearly has decided to cast a big net by moving beyond just the wives.

Not surprisingly, Tymoshenko provided no comment on either Azarov’s statement or Femen’s response. The former prime minister has walked a fine line in Ukraine on feminist issues throughout her career, espousing the virtues of caring for the home, while spending the majority of her time in her office.
However, Tymoshenko did respond to an issue much dearer to Azarov and Yanukovych – renegotiation of the 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas deal.

Azarov suggested recently that Ukraine would pay up to $330 per cubic meter—a stated market price—for gas this year (up from $280 in 2009), and said he would like Russia to lower the figure. He travels to Moscow today for talks on this and other economic issues with Russia PM Vladimir Putin. (6)

Since both Russia and Ukraine currently benefit from suggesting that Ukraine is paying a high gas price, it is difficult to know if that figure is correct. What is clear, however, is that Russia was contracted in the 2009 agreement to increase the gas transit fee paid to Ukraine by 25% this year. Azarov has made no mention of this provision.

Instead, Ukraine appears to be offering control of its pipelines as a payment offset. Several Ukrainian media outlets and the New York Times reported Wednesday that Yanukovych already had informed Moscow of his country’s willingness “to sell control over the pipelines’ operations to a consortium including…Russia’s natural gas giant Gazprom, and an unspecified European company.” (7) In the past, any suggestion of a potential consortium has included Germany, which is closely partnered with Gazprom in several ways, including on the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline.

Kommersant, meanwhile, reported that a Russian government source wants to know “what Russia will get in return” before amending the current deal. (8) Ironically, the pipeline consortium may not be enough. Several other media outlets suggest Russia is looking for a deal on past or upcoming privatizations. And there is the specter of returned Fuel and Energy Minister Yuriy Boiko – the former coordinator of Ukraine’s discredited and allegedly corrupt gas trader, RosUkrEnergo (RUE). Numerous officials in Ukraine and Russia allegedly made
significant money through RUE’s work in the gas trade until Tymoshenko dissolved the company last year.

Yanukovych and Azarov both must understand, however, that asset concessions and new gas trading companies likely will require legislative changes. A fierce push-back led by Tymoshenko also would need to be overcome.

"The gas pipeline system will remain the property of Ukraine and will make our country strong," she recently said, promising not to allow the creation of any consortium. Additionally, Tymoshenko vowed to stop the return of RUE, saying, “We will fight so this does not happen.” (9)

Moreover, it is unknown how the international community would react to a return to the more unstable pre-2009 gas accords. The 2009 agreement was hailed as a major step forward by many Europeans. Already, the IMF has shown hesitance to restart lending to Ukraine, after suggesting this week that proposed reforms in the energy and social sectors do not go far enough. (10)

Regardless, there is no question that the “old-boy network” has returned in Ukraine, with the country once again requesting a subsidy from big brother next door. Government officials may see the subsidies as necessary. Or, they may see them as a pretext to reintroduce a number of schemes thought to have been removed from Ukraine’s energy trade for good.

Source Notes:
(1) UNIAN, 2123 GMT, 18 Mar 10 via www.unian.net; “Ukraine’s new leaders seek to revive cooperation with IMF,” AFP, 24 Mar 10 via Google News; and AP, 0655 EST, 25 Mar 10 via Google News.
(2)UNIAN, 1450 CET, 20 Mar 10 via www.unian.net [Ukrainian].
(3) Mail Online, 1446 GMT, 24 Mar 10 via www.dailymail.co.uk.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.


