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Changing media and politics in Tajikistan

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Introduction

Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in the world with one of the lowest levels of internet penetration. Nonetheless, for hundreds of thousands of Tajiks, new media are becoming part of their daily life. According to *Tajikistan Electronic Readiness Research* released in early May 2013, over the past few years the number of internet users, especially those who access internet via mobile phones, has significantly increased in Tajikistan¹. More and more Tajiks are now present on social networks, such as Facebook and Odnoklasniki. They actively discuss a wide range of issues from personal relationships to the social and economic development of their country, from literature to cultural problems, such as the necessity to bring back the Persian alphabet, from more administrative to more political issues, such as corruption, fraud, authoritarianism and human rights.

Demand for change is growing day by day. The newly arrived social media, where people of different ages, sexes, religious or political background converse with each other, has become a battlefield between the advocates of change and those who want to preserve the *status quo*². For many people, there is a dilemma of choice between change and stability, a condition analogous to that of the early 1990s, where enduring protests of two opposing groups in two central squares in the Tajik capital city Dushanbe were swiftly followed by a bloody civil war that took the lives of as many as 100,000 and displaced more than one million people³.

The rhetoric of civil war, the horrible memories of which are still alive, has always been used by government officials and their supporters alike to warn people of possible consequences of any kind of protest. This has helped to secure the regime's power, so far unchallenged. Such rhetoric is still being used in social media discussions today to suppress any voice of dissent even online, but for those seeking change, it is no longer appropriate. They say authorities should rather accept new realities, such as the power of new media, and give way to new generation of young people with new skills and ideas to come to power and lead the country to prosperity.

With the growing access to new communication technology over the past two decades, along with the opening up of previously sealed Soviet borders, people have come to communicate more and more with the world, and the flow of information and knowledge, exchange of ideas and experiences have become smoother. It is no longer possible to control people's minds with state propaganda. Despite warnings of another possible war, many Tajiks now seem to be inspired and filled with demand for change that had once been frozen by the horror of war and suppression in early 1990s.

To study these processes, it is important to take into account the geopolitical situation of Tajikistan which is located in mountainous terrain in the heart of Central Asia. Once at the

¹ Tajikistan Electronic Readiness Research; Assessment of various factors identifying e-readiness of Tajikistan for participation in information society; Association of Internet Providers of Tajikistan, Public fund "Internet" Tajikistan with the financial support of Open Society Institute-Assistance Foundation Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 2012

² Social media in Tajikistan: a battlefield; my blog in BBC Media Action's website; published on 18 June 2013, accessible at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/posts/Social-media-in-Tajikistan-a-battlefield->

³ Tajikistan and the OSCE: Celebrating a productive decade of peace-building, OSCE Magazine: Tapping into Tajikistan's vast potential, June-July 2007, p 5. accessed at <http://issuu.com/osce/docs/osce-magazine-june-july-2007?e=1143293/2911375>

crossroads of cultures and civilisations, the country is now considered to be one of the most isolated parts of the world. Due to its long and insecure border with Afghanistan, where the threat of terrorism, drugs and Islamic extremism persists, Tajikistan - as the rest of Central Asia - is considered to be a place of potential unrest.⁴

It is also important to study this region because governments in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia are often considered to be authoritarian states with long-lasting rulers, large labour migration, widespread poverty and corruption. On the eve of the November 2013 presidential elections in Tajikistan many in the country and abroad had been looking at it to see whether there was any chance of more democratisation. Even some researchers started questioning whether an “Arab Spring” scenario could be possible in Central Asia, in general, and Tajikistan, in particular.⁵ Although there was no serious change in power following the presidential election in 6 November 2013, discussions about change are still ongoing in social media platforms, especially in Tajik pages of Facebook.

By the time I was editing the final version of my report, the Central Election Commission announced the final results of the presidential elections. With contested turnout of 90.1 per cent, acting president Emamali Rahman was once again declared the winner by securing 84.23 per cent of votes in a poll conducted with no serious competition. Among his five rivals from the Communist, Socialist, Democrat, Agricultural and Economic Reform parties no one was able to secure more than 5 per cent of the general vote.⁶

Opposition Islamic Rebirth Party candidate Aynehal Babanazarova, who could have challenged Mr Rahman, had already failed to collect enough signatures in her support before being registered by the Central Election Commission on 10th October. Nevertheless, some opposition groups, such as the Social-Democratic Party led by the well-known lawyer and the former presidential advisor Rahmatilla Zayirov and the opposition Vatandar Movement led in exile by dissident journalist Dadajan Atavollah, boycotted the election. Chilled by failed attempts to register their candidate, leaders of the Islamic Rebirth Party, the most influential opposition group in Tajikistan, announced before the election that they would not participate in the election, though ‘we would not boycott it.’⁷

Research Methods

My basic research question was whether the growing access to new communication technology would bring about any change in people's lives in Tajikistan. Subsidiary questions I sought to answer were what role new media (internet, social networks, mobile phones) can play in this process; how new media tools can fill the information gap caused

⁴ Tajikistan 2013 Crime and Safety Report, The Overseas Security Advisory Council, United States Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, published in 18 February 2013, accessed at <https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=13608>

⁵ An “Arab Spring” scenario in Central Asia?, by Fabio Indeo, published at Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics on 10 July 2012, accessed at <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/an-%E2%80%9Carab-spring%E2%80%9D-scenario-in-central-asia/1925>

⁶ Announcement of final results of the 2013 Presidential Election by the Central Election Commission of Tajikistan, published on 13 November 2013, accessed at <http://kmir.tj/files/files/%D0%98%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B8%20%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%202013.doc>

⁷ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, ХНИТ аз ширкат дар интиҳобот ‘худдорӣ’ мекунад, (IRPT refrains from participating in election), published on 21 October 2013, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2013/10/131021_sq_ielex_boycott_nahzat_islam.shtml

by the lack of access to traditional media, such as TV, newspapers and radio stations, how new ideas and concepts about democracy, human rights and freedom can reach the population in Tajikistan through new media technology and whether they are able to make their governments more accountable.

For the purpose of this research I interviewed a number of intellectuals, journalists, politicians and government officials. Critically, I also interviewed a random sample of Facebook users from Tajikistan and abroad, including some labour migrants in Russia. I drew upon existing scholarly articles, books and previously published surveys and comparative analyses about the impact of new media technologies in society and politics in other countries, including works done by previous RISJ fellows and BBC Media Action staff in different parts of the world.

Case studies of particular events in social media and those related to the use of new media and communication technology, such as mobiles, constitute the core of my research. I particularly selected cases related to mobiles and Facebook, because the former is the most widespread tool of communication in Tajikistan and the latter the most popular place where Tajiks converse with each other and discuss a variety of issues related to their country. These two have more potential to impact social and political life in Tajikistan. For particular events or developments I referred to reports by BBC Persian and some local media in Tajikistan. I also derived statistics and figures from a variety of sources, including reports by the International Telecommunication Union, Internet World Stats and, more recently, from a report published by the Association of Internet Providers of Tajikistan.

In the first chapter of this research I look at the background to the media in Tajikistan and how it has evolved since the time of Glasnost, when the first and last USSR president Mikhail Gorbachyev's policy not only assisted democratic transitions in many countries, but also brought about the downfall of the communist system and the emergence of new nations on the map of the world. Tajikistan's case is particularly important because it was one of the pioneers of democracy struggles among the former Soviet republics in the early 1990s, but suddenly, not long after independence, almost all voices of freedom in the country became silent - a situation which continued until recently.

The second chapter focuses on the arrival of new communication technology, such as mobiles and internet, their impact on people's lives and how they changed people's perception of the world. The third chapter is about how social media provide a platform for discussions, conversations, exchange of views and opinions among the growing number of Tajik netizens. The fourth chapter looks at how the government responded to challenges brought about by new media and the criticisms found in public discussions on the internet. The fifth chapter deals with how mainstream or traditional media find themselves in the face of growing presence of 'new journalism'. Finally, I bring together my conclusions.

1. Changing Media in Tajikistan

Central Asia historically was at the crossroads of the Silk Road. It came under Russian rule in the mid-19th century when the Russian and British empires contested for the region in what is called the Great Game⁸. After the establishment of Soviet rule, Central Asia was divided into five Soviet republics and people were split along their tribal and ethnic lines.

Tajikistan was one of the newly created republics with a new and previously obscure identity. It differed from the rest of Central Asian republics mainly by being the only Persian-speaking nation. It borders Uzbekistan to the north-west, Kyrgyzstan to the North, Afghanistan to the South, and China to the East.

'Golden era' of Tajik journalism

It all started with *Perestroika* - a term coined by Mikhail Gorbachev, the first and the last president of the USSR. After coming to power as the new General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, Gorbachev promoted a new vision that everyone should be free to express their opinion. That vision was called "*Glasnost*," meaning 'openness' or 'transparency', often rendered as 'publicity' in English academic literature. As part of this policy, Gorbachev granted more freedoms to journalists and intellectuals to criticize the government and state officials.

In the first years of Gorbachyev's rule, criticism of officials or certain parts of the government structure was practised. Towards the beginning of the 1990s, however, new public (non-state) and private newspapers emerged in Tajikistan. Some journalists and intellectuals started to rather question the very foundation of the Soviet system and the communist ideology. In particular, they would emphasize issues of national identity and explain how the Soviet system suppressed the national consciousness in order to construct a new identity of Soviet nationhood.⁹

On July 21, 1989 local Tajik government adopted a law on official language under public pressure and criticism from intellectuals and journalists. After seventy years of Soviet rule, the law made Persian (Tajik)¹⁰ the official language of Tajikistan for the first time. This caused concerns among mainly urban Russian and Russianized population who started to emigrate from Tajikistan to other parts of the former Soviet Union, mainly Russia.

On September 14, 1989, members of the Tajik *intelligentsia* established a movement called *Rastakhiz* (lit: 'Resurrection') with a moderate nationalist and democratic programme. Led by economy scholar Taher Abdujabbar, this movement became the first formal opposition group to the Communist Party and played a prominent role in the national independence movement. Later, Democratic and Islamic Rebirth parties formally came into existence.

A government crackdown on protesters in February 1990 left some 20 people dead in one of

⁸ The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia, by Peter Hopkirk, Kondasha International, 1992

⁹ Матбуъоти даҳаи 1990: Озодие, ки аз Тоҷикистон рафт барбафт (Media in 1990s: Lost freedom in Tajikistan), Ahmadshah Kamelzadeh, article published in BBC Persian page on 07 March 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/03/120307_ea_tajik_press_1990s.shtml

¹⁰ Tajik or *Tajiki* is a variety of Persian, spoken in Central Asia. Under the Soviet rule the language was given a new identity in an attempt to detach it from Persian of Iran and Afghanistan to curb any possible secessionist tendencies. Soviet authorities first replaced Persian alphabet with Latin in 1929 and then with Cyrillic in 1939.

the central squares of Dushanbe. This served as a turning point in the history of Tajikistan and Tajik media, which is also considered to be the ignition spark of civil conflict. Authorities accused the *Rastakhiz* movement of inciting violence and banned it. But in May 1990, *Rastakhiz* started publishing a newspaper of the same name in which it sharply criticized the government for firing at protesters. The authorities' failure to handle the bloody protests in February sparked discontent among the vast majority of population.

Soon, two other newspapers, *Charagh-e Rouz* ('Daylight') and *Adalat* ('Justice'), appeared on the scene. The former was the first private newspaper, published by journalist Dadajan Atavollah. The second belonged to the newly registered Democratic Party of Tajikistan, which was established on 10 August 1990 by university lecturer Shadman Yousuf. Together with other opposition parties, it organised a successful public demonstration in August 1991 that led to the resignation of the Tajik Communist Party leadership, which had supported the abortive coup against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.¹¹

The Law on Press and Other Media of Communication adopted in December 1990 paved the way for the emergence of other independent and private newspapers. More than 30 independent newspapers were published between 1990 and 1992. In this period, Tajikistan was far more advanced in challenging the hegemony of the Communist Party than any other Central Asian country.¹² The same applied to the wider democratization process. Some former communist newspapers changed their names: *Tajikistan-e Shuravi* (Soviet Tadjikistan) into *Jumhuriyat* (The Republic), *Komsomol-e Tajikistan* (Komsomol of Tajikistan) into *Javanan-e Tajikistan* (Youths of Tajikistan), and *Communist Tadjikistana* (Communist of Tajikistan) into *Narodnaya Gazeta* (People's newspaper). Although they were no longer organs of the communist party, they remained state-owned.¹³

According to official statistics, the annual number of circulation of Tajik newspapers and journals was 112 million in 1992.¹⁴ For a country with a population of about 6 million, this was quite a significant figure. Journalists had no fear, they would write about anything they wished. There was no journalist ethics either. Pages of newspapers, both state-owned and opposition ones were filled by slanderous propaganda targeted at certain public personalities, rather than fair and impartial reporting. Nevertheless, some journalists call that time the "golden era" of Tajik journalism, because 'people for the first time saw such an open political atmosphere, press freedom and new culture of journalism.'¹⁵

Civil War impact

A referendum was held on March 17, 1991 on the future of the Soviet Union. Around 80 per cent of voters voted in favour of preserving the Soviet Union. In Tajikistan, the turnout was 94.45 percent with 96.85 percent voting in favour of the USSR. Five months later, following

¹¹ The Tajik civil war: Causes and dynamics, article by Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes published in the journal *Accord*, N10, Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process, published in 2001, accessed at <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/tajik-civil-war-causes-and-dynamics>

¹² Тоҷикистон: журналистикаи 19 соли истиқлолият (Tajikistan: Journalism of 19 years of independence), by Prof Abdusattar Nuraliyev and Mirsayid Sultanov, lecturers of Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, published on Summer 2011, accessed at http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=4089

¹³ Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan, by Kamoludin Abdullaev and Shahram Akbarzadeh, 2010, p 233,

¹⁴ Тоҷикистон: журналистикаи 19 соли истиқлолият, see above

¹⁵ Матбуоти даҳаи 1990: Озодие, ки аз Тоҷикистон раҳт барбаст (Media in 1990s: Lost freedom in Tajikistan), Ahmadshah Kamelzadeh, article published in BBC Persian page on 07 March 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/03/120307_ea_tajik_press_1990s.shtml

the August coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, all republics declared their independence one after another. The USSR was dissolved in December 1991¹⁶ and among other Central Asian republics, Tajikistan too gained independence 'with no charge'.

Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the struggle for power started in Tajikistan. The Communist government was no longer able to control the situation. Most communist leaders traditionally came from the northern city of Khojand and its surrounding areas (formerly Leninabad and presently Sogdian region), which was industrially more advanced than the South. People from the southern Khatlan region were not given an equal share of state power. Islamists had a stronghold in the Rasht valley, east of Dushanbe.¹⁷

The Tajik Civil War¹⁸ broke out in May 1992 when opposition groups - mainly from the east of Tajikistan - rose against the government of President Rahman Nabiyeu who came from the northern city of Khojand. Nabiyeu lost power soon after a group of pro-opposition young armed men took him hostage and forced him to sign his resignation letter.¹⁹

In December 1992, a parliamentary session was held in the northern city of Khojand to restore constitutional order. However, in Mr Nabiyeu's place it installed Emamali Rahmanov, a man without a serious political background and former chairman of one of the collective farms in the Danghara district of the southern Koulab region, who 'had little experience in government.'²⁰ Rahmanov came to power with the support of paramilitary groups united under the name of People's Front of Tajikistan which fought against Islamists and democrats with the backing of Russia and Uzbekistan.

The five years' Tajik Civil War of 1992-97 is one of the world's less studied civil conflicts. Its figures are still obscure. At that time no foreign media and international NGOs had access to the country and lots of brutalities, crimes and human rights violations from all parties went unreported. According to various sources, between 50 and 150 thousand people were killed during the five years of fighting between 1992 and 1997- including 60 to 75 journalists, mostly killed by members of warring groups. Many more were arrested and tortured by members of the National Front that brought Emamali Rahman to power, and other groups. Almost all private newspapers and the majority of state-owned newspapers were suspended. Self-censorship became widespread.²¹

From 1990 to 2001, Tajikistan was one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Journalists became targets for killings. In December 1992 alone, four journalists were killed. There were also instances of journalists who were killed for their criticism of Islamic groups allied with the opposition. By 1995 at least 37 journalists had been killed in Tajikistan. In nearly all of those cases no suspects have been arrested or brought to trial.

On 5 May 1992, Muradullah Sheraliev, editor-in-chief of the parliamentary newspaper *Sada-ye Mardom* was one of the first journalists killed in civil war in Tajikistan. Two years

¹⁶ Wikipedia, Soviet Union Referendum, 1991, accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union_referendum,_1991

¹⁷ Economic Regionalism in Tajikistan, by Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Columbia University, 1996, p.9 accessed at <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1996-809-08-2-Tadjbakhsh.pdf>

¹⁸ For more details about Tajik Civil War see Wilder Bullard's All against all: Tajik Civil War (1991-1997), published in The Washington Review of Turkish and Eurasian Studies on November 2011, accessed at <http://www.thewashingtonreview.org/articles/all-against-all-the-tajik-civil-war.html>

¹⁹ Faraj Online, Sepehr Karamatollah, Зухур ва сукути Раҳмон Набиев (The rise and fall of Rahman Nabiyeu), published on 01 October 2012, accessed at <http://faraj.tj/index.php?newsid=1302>

²⁰ GlobalSecurity.org, Tajikistan Civil War, publishing date unknown, accessed at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/tajikistan.htm>

²¹ Tajikistan Freedom Of Expression Still Threatened. November 1999, Human Rights Watch, 1999, accessed at http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/tajikistan/Tajik99n-05.htm#P217_40796

later, an editor of another government newspaper, *Jumhuriyat*, was shot dead near his home in Dushanbe. In December 1995, the famous photographer and BBC journalist Muhieddin Alempour was shot dead in Dushanbe. He was the first BBC journalist from Tajikistan who worked in the BBC's Persian bureau in Dushanbe. A year later, a correspondent of Russian Public TV (ORT), Viktor Nikulin, was shot dead near his office.²²

Some famous Tajik intellectuals, such as medical professors Yusuf Is'haqi and Menhaj Gholamov were killed in 6 May 1996, and academician Mohammad Asimi was assassinated in 29 July 1996. Although the Peace agreement between the opposition leader Sayed Abdullah Nouri and President Rahman put an end to five year civil war in June 1997, but killing and assassination of journalists, intellectuals and public personalities by various groups in Tajikistan continued until the fall of 2001 when the launch of global war on terror changed the arrangement of the world and regional politics following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York.

Famous Tajik journalist and member of the opposition Atakhan Latifi was killed on 22 September 1998. The former parliament's speaker and key opponent of President Rahman Safarali Kenjayev was shot dead near his apartment in March 1999. Head of the national TV and Radio Committee Sayf Rahimzad, filmmaker Rudaki Behdin and Culture Minister Abdurahim Abdurahimov were assassinated between 2000 and 2001.

During this period, the government took control of state TV and radio stations and they subsequently became tools of the state propaganda. The quality of their programs was seriously deteriorated. People would rather watch Russian ORT and RTR TV stations which were then rebroadcast in Tajikistan. This period is also marked by widespread warlordism in Tajik war-struck society.

Following the civil war, members of the People's Front who brought Emamali Rahman to power, dominated the political and social life of the country. They were seen almost everywhere, in the parliament, in bazaars, universities, public transport, dressed in military uniforms, holding Kalashnikov rifles. They did not tolerate any voice of dissent, and even sometimes punished journalists.

Post-war media: Weeklies, no dailies

A new wave of independent media (newspapers, radios and television channels) emerged after 2001 following the events of 9/11 and the growing presence of the West in Central Asia. Most of the Central Asian countries assisted the US and its coalition forces in the war on terror in Afghanistan. They received huge assistance in return. At the same time, the presence of western NGOs and international organisations in the region increased. Among other programmes, they supported media projects and trained journalists.

Some independent newspapers, like *Nirou-ye Sokhan*, *Rouz-e Nav*, *Millat*, *Negaah*, *Farazh* and *Azadegan* have emerged in the past twelve years. The first two were forced to close down under pressure from tax authorities in 2005. In his speech to mark 100th anniversary of Tajik press in 11 March 2012, Tajik president Emamali Rahman said that out of 139 journals and newspapers published in 1991 only four were private. At that time only one state news agency operated in the country. "Today, 446 newspapers and journals are published in our country, out of which 270 are private, - he said, adding that nine of ten news agencies are also private. According to him, now 44 radio and TV stations operate

²² BBC Persian Photo Gallery, Tajik journalists killed between 1992 and 2000, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/03/120310_sq_killed_journalists_album2.shtml

across Tajikistan, out of which 28 radio and TV stations are private.²³

Although the statistical figures have increased over the past two decades, but according to media analysts, the quality of media remains poor. And most of the so-called independent newspapers are considered to be tabloids. State owned newspapers such as *Jumhuriyat* and *Seda-ye Mardom* limit their content with long articles in praise of President Rahman's 'intelligent policies' in different spheres. Although these two newspapers are published thrice a week and their number of circulations is around 30 thousand, but most of people are not interested in reading them. Usually, teachers of schools and local government staff in towns and villages are forced to subscribe to state-owned newspapers.

Some independent newspapers like *Negaah*, *Millat*, *Azadegan* and *Farazh*, discuss serious political, economic and social issues critically, they give space or tribune to opposition voices as well, but they do not reach all parts of Tajikistan, especially rural areas. They are costly (2 samanis²⁴ or 40 cent) and their number of circulation is low (2000 to 6000). Transportation to rural areas would only add to their costs. During the Soviet Union, postal service would effectively distribute newspapers to all parts of Tajikistan, but since the time of civil war and emergence of 'market economy' the postal service does not operate effectively. Owners of some independent newspapers established a joint distributing cooperative named "*Matbou'at*" on the eve of presidential election in summer 2013 with a grant from US embassy, but due to lack of further funding and conflict between newspaper owners, the project worked only for four months and has suspended.²⁵

Most of the private radio and TV channels in Tajikistan broadcast only entertainment programs. The State TV and Radio Committee which gives license to radio and TV channels have issued few licences for mainly local TV and radio stations in districts and towns over the past few years, but according to Nuriddin Qarshibayev, head of the Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, most of these TV and radio channels are not effective. "Licenses issued to those media outlets that do not work effectively, but serious ones are deprived of licenses, he told me adding that over the past few years more than eight radio and TV channels suspended their operation in northern Sogdian region."²⁶

In 2006, in a meeting in Dushanbe Tajik, Iranian and Afghan presidents announced that they would establish a joint Persian TV for the three countries, but this project has so far not been completed due to differences over the content of its programs. Iranian and Afghan officials want that TV presenters appear with headscarf; Tajik officials want to show dances and music, so due to ideological differences the project is pending.²⁷ From other hand, with the growing market of satellite antennas, lot of people in rural Tajikistan now watch Persian TV channels broadcast from Iran, Afghanistan, Dubai, London and Los-Angeles. According to my personal observations, Persian entertainment channels such as *PMC*, *Farsi1*, *GemTV*, *Tolo*, and *Manoto* have become quite popular in Zarafshan valley.

On the eve of presidential election in Tajikistan a new and perhaps the first opposition TV channel started broadcasting from Moscow, Russia. It is not clear how widely it is watched

²³ Tajik president's address on 100th anniversary of Tajik Press, March 10, 2012, accessed at <http://president.tj/node/222>

²⁴ *Samani* is the national currency of Tajikistan, introduced in October 2000. It derives its name from the Samanid dynasty that ruled Central Asia and parts of Afghanistan and Iran in 9-10th centuries

²⁵ Secretary of the cooperative 'Matbou'at' Bakhtiyar Amini told me that owners of a number of local independent newspapers failed to complete their obligations to sponsor its further activity.

²⁶ Qarshibayev told me this in a private conversation

²⁷ BBC Persian report cited the former Deputy Head of the Tajikistan's State Radio and TV Committee Abdurahman Abdumannanov, published in 16 July 2008, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/tajikistan/story/2008/07/080716_rm_persian_tv.shtml

in Tajikistan, but its programs are often shared in the pages of Facebook. Prior to that, Kazakh opposition K+ TV allowed dissident journalist and leader of opposition Vatandar Movement Dadajan Atavollah to broadcast a series of programs in Persian (Tajik) where he criticized Tajik President Emomali Rahman, including his son's wedding video that sparked widespread criticism of Mr Rahman's policies.²⁸

Newspapers go online

Over the past few years some of the independent newspapers also started to go online. A new phenomenon of newspaper-news agency emerged in Tajikistan. Owners of most of newspapers also have online news agencies which provide news throughout the day and publish them in the newspapers once a week. The most active news-paper-news agencies in Tajikistan are *ASIA-Plus*,²⁹ which basically has a page in Russian, but also has Tajik and English pages, *Tojnews*³⁰ in local Tajik (Persian) which is associated with *Negaah* newspaper, *Farazh Online* (in Tajik Persian) associated with *Farazh* newspaper, *Millat* (in Tajik Persian), associated with *Millat* newspaper and *Azadegan*³¹ ([www. ozodagon.com](http://www.ozodagon.com)) associated with *Azadegan* newspaper which has online pages in both Persian and Tajik Cyrillic scripts, and in Russian. *Azadegan* was perhaps the first online news agency which has special webpage in Persian script and provides news for Persian-speaking readers mainly from Iran and Afghanistan.

Apart from news stories, these websites also upload images and videos and share their stories in the pages of Facebook. Among them, *ASIA-Plus* website has a special mobile page and RSS. The others do not have mobile pages, although *Tojnews* has a podcast service. *Farazh Online* provides its newspaper version online separately in PDF format. They effectively compete with each others. State owned newspapers, such as *Jumhuriyat* and *Seda-ye Mardom* and the state news agency "Khaavar" also have their online versions. *Khaavar* has pages in Persian (in both Cyrillic and Persian alphabets), Russian, English, Arabic and German.

In general, the situation of the Tajik media has improved significantly over the past ten years, but some problems persist. Most of the newspapers have low circulation (from one to 10 thousand), they are published once a week and are distributed only in cities and towns; they do not reach far and remote villages where the majority of population lives. State radio and TV channels have always been criticised for preaching 'intelligent policies' of the president, while giving no space to opposition and critical views. This puts a vast majority of population in rural areas in total isolation, having no access to any source of information.

The emergence of online news sites is a good step forward in filling the information gap created by the lack of access to print and broadcast media in Tajikistan, but their audiences are also limited mostly to urban educated population who have better access to internet. The most widespread communication tool is mobile, but most of Tajik online media do not have their special mobile sites which could be easily accessible for most of the population. Instead mobile users have easier access to social networks, such as *Facebook*, *Odnoklasniki*, YouTube, and Twitter, with major mobile operators in the country providing special cheaper tariffs for easier access to social networks, although the quality of information that they get

²⁸ The video was put in YouTube on 26 May 2013 and is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpjQ3Xo-Fdo>

²⁹ ASIA-Plus websites is accessible at <http://news.tj/>

³⁰ Tojnews website is accessible at <http://www.tojnews.tj/>

³¹ Azadegan website is accessible at <http://www.ozodagon.com>

from social media, cannot be compared with the mainstream professional media.

Lack of sufficient training does not allow journalists to interact effectively with their audiences. And their rights are not properly protected. National Union of Journalists of Tajikistan is a Soviet legacy and works closely with the government, rather than being a professional trade union. The head of this organisation, Akbarali Sattarov, is an owner of a number of tabloid newspapers, such as *Charkh-e Gardun*, *Vecherniy Dushanbe*, *Daygest Press* and *Avicenna* (the first in Tajik Persian, the rest in Russian) rather than being a journalist who could defend the cause of journalists employed in variety of media, such as radio, TV and newspapers, including his own ones, in case they protest against working conditions. This applies to owners of other newspapers as well who are mostly journalists-turned-media owners, a phenomenon characteristic of the present media in Tajikistan.

Chapter 2 A Country of Mobiles

Mobiles are considered to be one of the most advanced and effective tools of communication in the human history. They are also the most widespread devices humanity has ever used. According to media and communication researcher Alan Moore, 80 per cent of our planet is now covered by mobiles network. There are more mobile devices than people, he says, in a presentation entitled *Society, Organizations, Economies reshaped by mobile*, this level of connectivity and interconnectivity is unprecedented.³²

In fact, mobiles have become part of everyone's daily life and turned human society into a mobile society. They changed the nature of human relationships by cutting the distance and increasing the confidentiality and intimacy. They are not tools for communication alone, they play significant role in solving quite many issues in modern society through collecting, storing and exchanging data as well as guiding, organising, mobilizing and rallying people to different causes. Mobiles are widely used to ease and facilitate jobs and tasks in the transportation system, trade and business, banking and finance, public safety and security, energy, health and education. For instance, M-Health is one of the most useful ways to save the lives of hundreds and millions of children and mothers in developing countries, according to BBC Media Action which implements such projects in South Asia and Africa.³³

In times of disaster, such as earthquakes and floods, and in disaster affected areas, mobiles may become the last hope to provide crucial chance for saving lives of thousands of human beings. Mobiles also play an important role in raising and solving social and political issues, especially when used as a media tool, and in bringing about change in politics and governance. Their widespread use makes it easy to spread information, opinion, messages, statements and other data to hundreds of thousands of people across the network and trigger their reactions, such as approval or disapproval, content or discontent, support or protest. This chapter examines the impact of mobiles in public and political life in Tajikistan and whether it brings about any change in society.

Arrival of mobiles

Tajikistan was the most backward among the former Soviet republics in the sphere of communication. With a network that was almost totally dysfunctional, the Tajik government inherited a task of bringing it up to modern standards. According to BuddeComm, an Australia-based telecommunications research site, apart from its poorly maintained infrastructure, natural disasters caused damage to the equipment that undermined the integrity of the network. As part of liberalisation strategy, a substantial number of private mobile operators were allowed to enter the Tajik telecoms market from 1996 onwards.³⁴

Tajik Tel, a joint Tajik-Dutch enterprise and Jahan Page are considered to be the first companies that brought paging and mobile services to Tajikistan in 1996. Mobiles did not

³² Alan Moore, *Society, Organizations, Economies reshaped by mobile*. <http://www.slideshare.net/alan.smlxl/society-organisations-economies-reshaped-by-mobile>

³³ Yvonne MacPherson and Sara Chamberlain, *Health on the move, Can mobile phones save lives? Maternal and Child Health: the scale of the problem*, published in BBC Media Action Policy Briefing # 7, February 2013, p 3

³⁴ BuddeComm, *Tajikistan - Telecom, Mobile and Internet*, accessed at <http://www.budde.com.au/Research/Tajikistan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Internet.html>

attract many customers in the first several years, but after the year 2000 both the number of mobile operators and their customers started to grow rapidly. By 2006, Tajikistan was one of the most advanced countries in the former Soviet Union in terms of mobile usage.

Currently six mobile operators are active in Tajikistan's communications market. Companies such as Babylon-M, Tcell and MegaFon have the largest share of the market and offer services such as sound and video connection, the exchange of short and multimedia messages, as well as data transfer etc. At the same time, "...the service market for provision of mobile content is developing rapidly. Content-providers constantly enhance their sources and set of services by offering entertaining, informative and commercial content, which is highly demanded by the subscribers of the mobile net."³⁵

Mobile phones are now the most widespread tools of communication in Tajikistan. On the National Youth Day, May 23, 2013, in his address to the young population, President Emomali Rahmon said that the number of mobile subscribers in the country had reached 10 million. The country's population is 8 million. Compared to 2010, the number of subscribers had increased by 4 million, as there had been only 6 million subscribers three years ago, he added. However, according to the data released by the state Communication Service in January 2013, there were 8.3 million mobile subscribers in Tajikistan at the end of the last year. Out of this figure, 4.7 million mobile subscribers are considered to be active users.³⁶

According to official sources, the overall penetration of mobile telephony in Tajikistan is 105 per cent, with 60 per cent of the population active users. In total, all operators in the country provide mobile coverage across all territories, reaching 99 per cent of the population. Conversely, the figures for fixed telephone lines are quite low. According to official data, the number of fixed phone subscribers is around 400,000 in Tajikistan. The penetration rate of fixed telephony is about 5 per cent.³⁷

International figures differ significantly from that of local ones. According to data from the International Telecommunications Union, at the end of 2012 there were about 6.53 million mobile subscribers in Tajikistan. Statistically, little more than 92 out of 100 inhabitants had mobile phones. This data shows that Tajikistan is lagging behind two other more advanced countries in Central Asia - Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where mobile subscribers constitute 175 and 125 per 100 inhabitants respectively. Yet Tajikistan seems far more advanced than gas and cotton producing Uzbekistan, which is also the most populous and urban country in the region, and oil-rich Turkmenistan. The number of mobile subscribers in these two countries is 72 and 76 per 100 inhabitants respectively.³⁸

³⁵ Tajikistan Electronic Readiness Research; Assessment of various factors identifying e-readiness of Tajikistan for participation in information society; Public fund "Internet" Tajikistan with the financial support of Open Society Institute-Assistance Foundation Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 2012

³⁶ Tajik President's official website, *Суханронӣ дар мулоқот бо ҷавонони кишвар* (President's address to the young generation), accessed at <http://president.tj/node/4438>

³⁷ Tajikistan Electronic Readiness Research; Assessment of various factors identifying e-readiness of Tajikistan for participation in information society; Public fund "Internet" Tajikistan with the financial support of Open Society Institute-Assistance Foundation Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 2012

³⁸ International Telecommunications Union, *ICT Facts and Figures 2013, Mobile-cellular subscriptions*, accessed at http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2013/Mobile_cellular_2000-2012.xls

According to BuddeComm, an Australia-based global independent telecommunications research and consulting company, Tajikistan's mobile sector has been growing strongly for over a decade. By 2012, mobiles in Tajikistan had reached an estimated 130% penetration, with subscriber growth continuing to run at a healthy annual rate. It indicated that the overall mobile subscriber numbers had increased by a factor of almost 40 in just seven years. The growth rate peaked over that period when in 2007 Tajikistan's mobile subscriber numbers expanded at an annual rate of almost 200%. Four mobile operators were granted 3G licenses and subsequently launched their networks. Initially, demand for 3G services was low, but the market expanded rapidly through 2012 and into 2013.³⁹

These varying statistical figures show that the number of mobile subscribers in Tajikistan goes far beyond the number of the country's population. This does not mean, however, that every single citizen in Tajikistan has a mobile phone. Many people buy new mobile SIM cards, but they do not use them regularly; they lose their SIM cards or throw them away after they change the mobile operator. Therefore it is more reliable to judge the development of mobile communication based on the number of active mobile users. This applies to all countries.

Meanwhile, mobile communications has become one of the most developed and profitable sectors of the Tajik economy. Officially, income from communication services in 2012 made up more than \$470m -more than double the figure of the previous year. Its contribution to



Illustration 1: Mobile Transmitter in Vashan, a village in north of Tajikistan

the county's GDP grows, as new technologies become widely accessible.⁴⁰

Role of Migrants

One of the main reasons for the rapid growth of mobile telephony in one of the poorest and most backward countries in Central Asia is the large number of labour migrants who live

³⁹ BuddeComm, Tajikistan - Telecom, Mobile and Internet, accessed at <http://www.budde.com.au/Research/Tajikistan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Internet.html>

⁴⁰ Press release about the results of the Tajikistan's Communication Service activity in 2012, issued in January 2013

abroad, mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan. About 1.5 million Tajik labour migrants live in Russia. According to a World Bank report, the remittances that Tajik labour migrants send home through banks in 2011 made up over 47 percent of Tajikistan's national GDP.⁴¹

Labour migrants have assisted the growth of mobile usage because of their regular calls and communication with their families back at home. It was labour migrants who first brought mobiles to their families from Russia as gifts or sent money so that their relatives could buy mobiles to communicate with them. In turn the development of mobile telephony has assisted the labour migrants in both keeping contact with their families and communicating between themselves and other players in the labour market significantly reducing their costs of travel and searching of new jobs. They even use mobiles in transferring money to their relatives in Tajikistan. Nowadays many of money transferring companies send special codes to receivers of money who can go and receive it in local bank branches.

Being a mainly rural and mountainous country, fixed telephone lines has never been widespread in this part of the Soviet Union. I remember my childhood in a mountainous village in the north of Tajikistan where there was only one telephone in the administration office of the kolkhoz, (a Soviet-style collective farm), which did not work properly most of the time. It was the only means of communication in cases of emergency, used to call doctors or medical workers from the district administration centre if, for instance, an old, a disabled, or a pregnant women fell ill and urgently needed medical assistance.⁴²

Mountainous villages were historically so isolated that even their dialect differs from one village to the next. Nowadays, in these previously isolated villages one can see almost everyone carrying a mobile phone. In fact, mobiles have changed the way people live in these villages. Many villagers now use mobiles - not just to communicate with their family members abroad, but also for their daily activities - such as seeking health advice and communicating with their business partners in other villages, towns or cities.

Case 1. SMS divorces

Mobiles also play a greater role in developing personal relationships between younger rural generations. Moreover, there are now lots of love stories between girls and boys in villages related to mobile phones. When I last visited my birthplace in northern Zarafshan valley, I was told that girls and boys from different villages use mobile phones to get acquainted and write love messages to each others. One such a girl was disciplined by members of her family after they read her love messages. Some older villagers voiced concerns that pornographic films had been circulating among young mobile users and that this would have a negative impact on the morality of these users. Viewing such films was unprecedented in villages with people holding traditionally conservative morals.

Young married couples also use mobiles to communicate with each others, especially when husbands are labour migrants in Russia. In the summer 2008, there were reports of a growing number of divorces through text messages among young labour migrants in Russia

⁴¹ World Bank report: Migration and Development Brief, Remittances to developing countries will surpass \$400 billion in 2012, accessed at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1288990760745/MigrationDevelopmentBrief19.pdf>

⁴² New Media in New Tajikistan, my blog published in BBC Media Action website on 9 April 2013, accessible at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmiaaction/posts/Social-media-in-Tajikistan-a-battlefield->

and their wives in Tajikistan.⁴³ According to Islamic tradition, it seems that when a husband pronounces the Arabic word “*talaq*”, he automatically divorces his wife. If he pronounces this word three times, he will never be able to re-marry her again.⁴⁴

Mobiles facilitated the growing number of such ‘easy; or ‘quick’ divorces in Tajikistan after many labour migrants had become unable to feed their wives and even children and started to send their wives divorce (*talaq*) text messages. This sparked widespread concerns and became a serious challenge for religious leaders, because, as one religious leader told me, ‘there were no mobiles in the time of the Prophet Muhammad so we don’t know if such a divorce is valid.’

In April 2011, the chairman of the Religious Committee of Tajikistan announced that the Council of Islamic Scholars will issue a fatwa to ban SMS divorces. In the summer 2011, a local NGO reported that it assisted the reunion of 14 couples separated after divorces via mobile text messages. However, the famous Islamic scholar Nuriddin Turajanzadeh told a labour migrant who asked a question about SMS divorce in one of his sermons: “My Muslim brother, if you wrote this message to your wife consciously and intentionally, then your *talaq* (divorce) is valid.”⁴⁵

Case 2. Quake Hoax

In the night of January 9-10, 2009 hundreds of thousands of families in Tajikistan rushed out of their homes to spend a harsh and cold winter night outdoors. It was neither a un-Tajik Halloween party, nor a traditional “*Sizdahbedar*” during which people spend their time out of their homes in the 13th day of Persian New Year in early spring. Around midnight groups of men, women and children, most of whom poorly dressed, suddenly decided to go outdoors to escape what they described as a possible earthquake as strong as 9 degree of Richter scale.⁴⁶

Many of those interviewed by journalists said that they had received mobile calls or text messages from their relatives in other parts of Tajikistan informing them about the ‘predicted’ earthquake. Some of them even said that the news had been broadcast on TV. The quake hoax started circulating at about 8:00pm and spread all over the country within two-three hours. Thousands of labor migrants in Russia too learned about it quickly and started exchanging calls with their families back in Tajikistan.⁴⁷

There was no reaction from the government throughout the night, as if the authorities also believed in the rumors. Only in the early morning of the following day did the state TVs start to broadcast announcements calling on the people to return to their homes, as

⁴³ BBC Persian, Tajikistan, Васи́лаи васл ё фасл? Талоқҳои телефонӣ дар Хатлон (Means of connection or separation? Mobile divorces in Khatlan), by Arezou Karim, published in 18 December 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2010/12/101217_ea_ak_divorce_sms.shtml

⁴⁴ BBC News, Tajik women face divorce epidemic, published on 13 October 2012, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19920528>

⁴⁵ Tojnews National Information Agency, Эшони Нуриддинҷон: Дар бораи талоқҳои "смс"-ӣ (Ishan Nureddinjan: About SMS divorces), published in 01 April 2013, accessed at <http://www.tojnews.org/eshoni-nuriddinjon-dar-borai-taloqhoi-smsi>

⁴⁶ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Изтироб ва бими zilzila дар Тоҷикистон (Fury of quake in Tajikistan), by Zarrineh Khoshvaqt, published on 10 January 2009, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2009/01/090110_zkh_earthquake_panic.shtml

⁴⁷ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Изтироб ва бими zilzila дар Тоҷикистон

seismologists 'denied predicting' any possible quake. Authorities promised to investigate and punish the culprits behind the rumors, fearing possible impacts on the health of the population, but never reported about any outcome of this investigation.



Lot of people in Tajikistan spent a night outside their homes in the night of 9-10 January 2009⁴⁸

This was perhaps the first major case of the nation-wide impact of mobile phones in a short period of time on the population of Tajikistan. Some local analysts later criticized people for their 'lack of education and foolishness' to believe in rumors. Some others went further to find 'foreign hands' in this hoax and criticized officials for not taking enough measures to protect 'information security' of the country to prevent the spreading of rumors. But no one dared recognize the power of new technology; the fact that mobiles drove tens of thousands of people out of their homes overnight.

With no political cause, this was surely the first case of mobilisation of a large number of people via mobiles in Tajikistan, but it will not be the last one. Mobile phones and other communication tools such as emails, text messages, microblogs and social networks, have driven hundreds of thousands of people to protests against their corrupt and repressive regimes in many parts of the world. It took less than two hours for thousands of Filipinos to converge on a crossroad in central Manila to protest against their president Joseph Estrada in January 17, 2001, after his loyalists in the Philippine Congress voted against his impeachment. "The protest was arranged, in part, by forwarded text messages reading, "Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk." The crowd quickly swelled, and in the next few days, over a million people arrived, choking traffic in downtown Manila."⁴⁹

Case 3. Torture video

⁴⁸ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Изтироб ва бими zilzila дар Тоҷикистон

⁴⁹ Essay by Clay Shirky, The political Power of Social Media, Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change, published by the US Council on Foreign Affairs on January/February 2011, accessed at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~beki/cs4001/Shirky.pdf>

In the past few years mobiles were also helpful in bringing lots of other irregularities to the attention of the public in Tajikistan. Similar cases were reported in other former Soviet republics, like Georgia. One of such cases was about widespread torture in prisons in Tajikistan. On September, 20, 2012, an inmate of one of the prisons in Dushanbe, Hamzeh Ikramzadeh, died in suspicious conditions. His relatives called journalists early next morning to inform them that his body would be delivered that day. They told journalists that Hamzeh called them before and said that he urgently needed money. He told them that he would give money to a prison officer and if he didn't give it within a certain period, he would not remain alive. They said they were desperately looking for some loan to save Hamzeh's life.⁵⁰

During the mourning ceremony, relatives allowed journalists to take pictures of his tortured body. They even took some photos themselves and sent them to different media through mobiles. The pictures were shocking. As they always do in such cases, the prison authorities denied any wrongdoing. The head of the Prisons Department of the Ministry of Justice, Izzatulla Sharipov, nicknamed "Zorro", conducted a number of interviews with the media following this incident. He repeatedly said that Hamzeh had committed suicide, but promised, 'we will investigate and anybody found to have tortured him will be punished.'

When asked about the condition of inmates, he also said in an interview to BBC two months later that prison was not a sanatorium. He said that although prisons were not the best place for living, the conditions were far better than before and cases of torture were absent.⁵¹

Days after, a number of women, relatives of Hamzeh, protested opposite the building of the Prisons Department. He met them and promised that authorities will conduct an investigation into the case. A prison doctor giving a post-mortem note said that Hamzeh had hanged himself. Asked why then there is an iron print in his body, he said 'we put bottles of warm water on his body to save his life in the last minutes.'⁵²

Perhaps prison officials thought that the case would die down. But soon afterwards, a released prisoner told journalists lots of things about the death of Hamzeh in prison.

Saidali Kazakov, the former inmate who was released in on 8 October 2012 after seven years of serving in prison, told journalists:

"A week before Hamzeh's death, one night six prison staff led by Mahmud Ismailov and Sherafgan (special force) came to our cells and pulled Hamzeh out. I saw with my own eyes how they were pulling him away. I went near Hamzeh's cell to ask his neighbours what had happened there. They said they (the prison guards) had beaten up Hamzeh. Early morning I saw Mahmud (a guard) who was bandaging his hand. I asked if he had beaten Hamzeh up and was therefore was now bandaging his hand. He said nothing and went away. After that I have never seen Hamzeh

⁵⁰ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Амир Икромзода: "Бародарам дар асари шиканча даргузашт" (Amir Ikramzadeh: My brother died of torture), published on 21 September 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/09/120921_sq_torture_prison.shtml

⁵¹ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Шарифов: 'Ман барои зиндонии шароити хуб мухайё кардаам' (Sharipov: Condition of inmates are satisfactory), published on 28 November 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2012/11/121127_zkh_prison_torture_interview.shtml

⁵² Тојнеуs, Ётирози хешовандони махбуси кушташуда (Protest of relatives of dead prisoner), published on 28 September 2012, accessed at <http://tojnews.org/node/4275>

*again as he was transferred to Shizo (solitary confinement) for 15 days. Later, his brother called me and said that Hamzeh was asking for money. He told me that prison staff demanded 2000 dollars to release Hamzeh from Shizo. I told him not to bring any money, as Hamzeh was innocent. He remained there for a week and then died. They kept him in Shizo for 15 days, so that his injuries would be treated and he would have no more evidence to complain about torture.*⁵³



A mobile video of six prisoners showing signs of torture in their bodies appeared in YouTube after they were transferred from a prison in Dushanbe to the northern town of Khojand in December 2012.

In a number of newspaper interviews and an online question and answer with readers of Tojnews private news agency on October 12, 2012, Saidali Kazakov revealed that torture and bribery was widespread across the prison system in Tajikistan.

“In prison they use batons, fetters and straitjackets ‘for medical treatment’. They give meals three times a day, but you can't eat it. They give porridge in the breakfast, a food made of water, peas and beans at launch. They give good food when special commissions come to investigate the prison condition. When we wanted to meet our parents, we would have to give the prison staff 100 to 200 samanis (20 to 40 dollars) in bribe. If my relatives sent me money, the staff receiving it would ask for his share. They get 10 out of each 100 samanis. Sometimes it is up to 30 samanis. In order to meet your relatives, you would have to pay 120 samani to the chief in advance, if there was no place (in the meeting room), then they would ask for 150 samanis (more than 30 dollars).”⁵⁴

Prosecutors conducted an investigation and upheld the prison doctor's claim that Hamzeh Ikramzadeh had committed suicide. But evidence came out of the prisons - thanks to mobile phones - on January 2013. A mobile video of six prisoners showing signs of torture on their bodies appeared on YouTube. They showed signs of torture and also confirmed that Hamzeh Ikramzadeh was tortured to death by prison staff. This mobile video was apparently taken after a group of prisoners had been transferred from the capital Dushanbe to the

⁵³ An interview published on BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Махбуси собик: 'Аз зиндонҳо касе солим бадар намеравад' (Former inmate: no one leaves prisons healthy) on 13 October 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2012/10/121012_zkh_prison_torture_interview.shtml

⁵⁴ Tojnews, *Фoшгӯиҳои ҳамнишини маҳбус Ҳамза Иқромзода* (Revelations by an inmate witnessing the death of Hamzeh Ikramzadeh), published on 12 October 2012, accessed at <http://tojnews.org/node/4457>

northern city of Khojand. They alleged that authorities transferred them to the north to prevent them from giving testimonies to lawyers investigating Ikramzadeh's case.⁵⁵

On January 2013, a number of people, mainly family members of Hamzeh Ikramzadeh, organised a protest near the Office of the Prosecutor General. Later President Rahman intervened and the Prosecutor General himself supervised another investigation and brought charges against some of the prison staff. Finally, on 29 May, one of the main culprits in Hamzeh's case, Ismail Mahmudov, was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. Ikramzadeh's family were not satisfied with the outcome of the trial, although the case at least brought about partial justice. It also had a great impact on the way prisoners are treated in Tajikistan. Prior to the trial, there had been lots of allegations of torture, but no such strong evidence was available. So the government could not be held accountable.

Meanwhile, among the prison officials nobody else was punished, the Head of the Prisons Department of the Ministry of Justice and all other prison and justice officials still hold their positions, the prison doctor also continues in his job. Instead, authorities in northern city of Khojand brought a criminal case against two of the prisoners in charges of leaking 'a fake prison torture' video. Their trial is still continuing in a court in Khojand.

Following this, there were even some changes in the courts' behavior in trying cases of torture. For the first time in the history of Tajikistan, on 6 March 2013, a court ruled that the Interior Ministry should pay about US\$10,000 to a family of a person who had died after police torture two years ago. Around the same time, the Ministry of Justice paid over US\$6000 dollars to the family of Ismail Bachajanov, another torture victim, who initially requested about US\$ 150,000, to avoid court ruling.⁵⁶

All these came after Tajik parliament changed the legislation in February 2012 to introduce a new clause on torture in the Criminal Code of Tajikistan. This reveals that while mobile communication provides a tool for sharing information, it is the continuous following of the story by journalists, pressure from civil society and public debates that will bring about real changes in governance.

⁵⁵ Youtube video "Зверское издевательство над заключенными в Таджикистане" (Brutal treatment of prisoners in Tajikistan)", published 12 December 2012, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RF4e4i6JoTdw>

⁵⁶ ASIA-Plus website, Bachajanov's widow receives compensation of 30,000 samanis, published on 06 March 2013, accessed at <http://news.tj/en/news/bachajanov-s-widow-receives-compensation-30000-somoni>

Chapter 3. Social Media: A Battlefield

The role of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, as well as other new social media tools and technology, like emails, group messaging, video- and photo sharing, has become prominent in recent changes in global and regional politics in different parts of the world. Many praise social media for launching campaigns that brought about the toppling of several governments, including the one of the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. But, many also blame the new technology for giving a wrong understanding that revolutionary changes solve all problems and make people happy overnight.⁵⁷

This may not always be true in every part of the world, because of the peculiarities of each country and each society, the degree of their populations' being ready for change and their level of access to new technology and the way they use it. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus among social media researchers that the new technology has an unquestionable impact on all societies in some way. Studying social media's impact in Tajikistan is of paramount importance, especially as the country held its presidential election in November 2013 and prepares itself for parliamentary elections in 2015.

Many are hopeful for transformation in Tajikistan, especially in the discussions and debates that take place in social networks. There are many discussion groups on Facebook that deal with various issues - such as corruption, bad governance, nepotism, centralisation of power, human rights abuse etc. People have started to question and criticize the government by using social media as a platform. Authorities made several attempts to block Facebook, but they were not successful. All of these groups seem to be eager for change; change in everything from politics, ways of life, and belief systems to culture and society. Nevertheless, are these discussions going to bring about any change soon? Do social media have the power or potential to change anything? This chapter tries to answer to these questions that everybody asks, but no one gives proper answers.

Arrival of Internet

The Internet arrived in Tajikistan towards the end of the 1990s. According to Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan, published in 2010, the Central Asian Development Agency (CADA), a US humanitarian organisation, was the first provider of an email service in Tajikistan. Between 1995 and 1998, it started email services in Dushanbe, Khojand, Kulaab, Qorghanteppe and Kharogh with the assistance from PERDKA, Soros and Eurasia Foundations. About 1500 people were registered by CADA as internet users in Tajikistan in 1998. It was perhaps the first opportunity for many young students, scholars and staff of international organisations to communicate with the world through electronic media. Full access to internet first became available in the cities of Dushanbe and Khojand in January 1999.⁵⁸

However, unlike the advancement of mobile telephony in Tajikistan, the country is

⁵⁷ The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change, by Clay Shirky, *Journal of Foreign Affairs*, published by the US Council of Foreign Affairs, January-February 2011, accessed at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~beki/cs4001/Shirky.pdf>

⁵⁸ Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan, by Kamoludin Abdullaev and Shahram Akbarzadeh, pp 293-295, Scarecrow Press, 2010

considered to be one of the least internet penetrated countries in the world. In Central Asia, Tajikistan lags behind its neighbours, such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in terms of internet access, although it has wider access to the internet than Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The growth of internet access has been slow in Tajikistan due to various factors, such as its geographical situation and its being a landlocked and isolated country. Also, Tajikistan's population is mainly rural and living in villages located in high mountain terrains, where infrastructural developments, like fixed telephone cables and broadband, are difficult and costly to install. Internet cables come to Tajikistan mainly from Russia through Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan or even Uzbekistan. Over the past few years, Wifi services have been introduced in major cities in Tajikistan, but for a country with more than 40 percent of the population living below poverty line, Wi-Fi seems too costly.

Data from the World Internet Stat shows that Tajikistan lags behind other Central Asian countries in terms of access to Internet, although it has outdated statistics. According to it, there were more than one million internet users or 13 per cent penetration rate in Tajikistan on June 30, 2012 out of a population of 7.7 million.⁵⁹ According to official sources, there were 3.7 million internet users in Tajikistan on January 30, 2013 which makes 47 per cent penetration level.⁶⁰ But taking into account the fact that lots of people now have access to internet through mobile phones, especially to mobile applications of social networks, one can assume that the number of internet users is growing. Over the past few years, some companies have provided cheaper access to social networks, such as Facebook, Odnoklasniki, Vkontakte and Mail.ru at a cost of 60 dirams (about 12 cent) a day.⁶¹

The Australia-based global telecommunication research and consulting company BuddeComm says that internet penetration had reached 16 per cent of Tajikistan's population by 2012.⁶² By now, taking into account the expansion of the network, it should have reached 18 to 20 per cent. In the neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which is also a mountainous country and has conditions similar to Tajikistan both in terms of geography and population, internet penetration is estimated to be about 22 per cent coming into 2013. Uzbekistan, one of the most populous (around 30 million) countries with the largest number of urban population, has an internet penetration of 37 per cent coming into 2013. Among the countries of the region, Kazakhstan is one of the most advanced countries as regards the economy and social development. It has around 50 per cent internet penetration, although this figure is contested. But economic development and larger access to internet do not seem to be favourable enough for people's engagement in social media.⁶³

According to the Networked Readiness Index 2013, Tajikistan is ranked 112th among 144 countries and territories, two ranks up from the previous year. Kyrgyzstan is ranked 118th, last year it was ranked 115th.⁶⁴ My colleague Serajoddin Talibov, who knows both Persian and the Turkic languages of Central Asia and works for BBC Uzbek Service, says that

⁵⁹ Internet World Stat; Usage and Population Statistics, Tajikistan, accessed at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#tj>

⁶⁰ Tajikistan Electronic Readiness Research, by Public Fund "Internet" Tajikistan, released on May 2013.

⁶¹ Option "Social Networks" by MegaFon-Tajikistan provides free and unlimited access to social networks, such as Facebook, Odnoklasniki and Mail.ru accesses at <http://taj.megafon.tj/internet/frommobile/services/social.html>

⁶² BuddeComm, Tajikistan – Telecoms, Mobile and Internet, accessed at <http://www.budde.com.au/Research/Tajikistan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Internet.html>

⁶³ BuddeComm, Tajikistan – Telecoms, Mobile and Internet...

⁶⁴ World Economic Forum, Global Information Technology Report 2013, Networked Readiness Index 2013, accessed at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GITR/2013/GITR_OverallRankings_2013.pdf

political discussions and debates are hotter in Tajik and Kyrgyz than in Uzbek groups on Facebook. According to him, Uzbeks are afraid of politics and do not criticise their president and government officials as much as Tajiks do.⁶⁵ In fact, media and press freedom reports by various organisations, such as Reporters without Borders and Committee to Protect Journalists often mention that press freedom is far more advanced in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan.⁶⁶ Perhaps peoples' engagement in social networks has more to do with a relatively favourable environment in terms of press freedom and freedom of speech than with the population's easy access to the internet. Only 22 per cent of Egyptians had access to the internet when public protests brought about the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak. Egyptian Facebook groups had been far more active than in any other country with similar conditions. Nevertheless, online journalism is considered to be an effective tool of propaganda for the opposition coalition as it generated hope for political change in the country.⁶⁷

From message-boards to blogs

Social media is not a new phenomenon in Tajikistan. It started with the internet's arrival in Tajikistan. In April 1999, a message-board named Tajikistan Online Forum was established by Abdurahman Saidov on Boardhost, a free service provider, which provided a platform for discussion of various issues for many young Tajiks - mainly those studying abroad. Towards 2004, it was one of the most active discussion forums related to Central Asia in cyberspace. It still exists to date, although it is not as active as it used to be.⁶⁸

The dispute between Tajiks and Uzbeks over the legacy of Central Asia's culture was the main topic of discussion and debate in this forum. Young Tajik people 'fought an online war' with their Uzbek counterparts to repair the 'historical injustice' done to Tajiks during the establishment of the Soviet republics in Central Asia in 1924. Tajiks argued that the two centres of Iranian civilization and mainly Tajik populated cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan belonged to Tajiks, but were wrongly given to Uzbekistan by Stalin. This was subject of 'intellectual bickering' between Tajik and Uzbek historians and politicians all the time during the era of the Soviet Union. Previously, they exchanged articles and books negating each other's claims in the print press, such as newspapers and scholarly books, but with the emergence of Internet the nationalist rhetoric made its way onto online discussion boards.

Another phase of online engagement of Tajiks started with the emergence of blogs in the local language in 2004. *A Dervish*⁶⁹ and *Eranshahr*⁷⁰ were perhaps the first blogs hosted on BlogSpot that contained articles about language, culture and politics of Tajikistan in English and Persian with Cyrillic alphabet. The former belonged to BBC Persian journalist Dariush

⁶⁵ My interview with Serajoddin Talibov

⁶⁶ In Reporters Without Border's Press Freedom Index 2013, Tajikistan is ranked 123, Kyrgyzstan 106, Kazakhstan 160 and Uzbekistan 164, accessed at <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013.1054.html>

⁶⁷ The Role of the Media in Democratic Transition in Egypt: a case study of the January 2011 Revolution, by Nagwa Abdallah, see https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Publications/fellows_papers/2010-2011/The_Role_of_the_Media_in_the_Democratic_Transition_in_Egypt.pdf

⁶⁸ Tajikistan Online Forum, Founded by Abdurahman Saidov April 26, 1999, accessed at <http://members.boardhost.com/tajikistan/>

⁶⁹ A Dervish, blog by my colleague Dariush Rajabian, created in October 2004, accessible at <http://dariussthoughtland.blogspot.com/>

⁷⁰ Eranshahr, my own blog in BlogSpot, created in July 2004, accessible at <http://eranshahr.blogspot.com/>

Rajabian and reflected his thoughts on the state of politics in the region and the world; such as the American invasion of Iraq, the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in October 2004, Russia's strengthening its foothold in Central Asia, the re-election of George Bush in the US presidential election in November 2004, the 'tulip revolution' in Kyrgyzstan and the massacre of Andijan protesters in Uzbekistan in 2005.⁷¹

However, blogging was not an attractive media for Tajiks until 2007 and 2009 when a number of Tajik blogs emerged on Wordpress. Most of the owners of these blogs were young Tajiks that lived abroad. In blogs such as *Andisheh* (Thought), *Tabaraxe* (Axe), *Mihanparast* (Patriot), *Vatandar* (Patriot), *Mardikarnamah* (Labour Migrants Diary), *Khorasanzamin* (Land of Khorasan), *Ayina* (Mirror) and *Charagh-e Rouzgar* (light of life), they started to publish their reflections on different social and political issues, such as energy crisis and labour migration, regionalism and nepotism, corruption and fraud in the government structure, and sometimes sharply criticised President Rahman's policies.

For instance, on April 18, 2008, a blogger of *Mihanparast* wrote the following ironic lines about a televised speech of the Tajik president:

*“Today Tajikistan's state TV showed Emamali Rahman. He was so furious that his lips were trembling. He ordered his subjects to plant wheat in every inch of soil, as, according to him, 'draught and doomsday' were looming. Emamali Rahman was nervous, very nervous, and said that a locust plague was a bad omen and may bring about draught and doomsday. He accused locust swarms of damaging agricultural conditions, but failed to mention that agricultural damage and growing poverty are the result of his and his close circles' policies. It was Rahman's policies that made the debt of cotton farms reach US\$500 million. It was his wrong policies that made people lazy and accustomed to receiving remittances from labour migrants, while refusing to work in 'presidential lands', which decreased wheat production. It was due to lack of attention by his Agriculture Ministry that let the population of locusts increase by 'ignoring' the control programme. Now the government is worried about its future and thinks of how to prevent the doomsday, that is, the social unrest that may possibly take place in future. Had he been far-sighted before, the locusts would not have become brave enough to threaten Rahman's government?”*⁷²

Facebook Groups

Public protests in the Arab World in spring 2010 were the turning point for social media in Tajikistan. Previously an obscure and unpopular network, Facebook has now become a very attractive and important social media for many Tajiks who were closely watching the developments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Islam played a great role in why Tajiks were interested in news and developments in Arab countries.

There were also large numbers of Tajik students who studied in religious seminaries or madrassahs in Arab and Islamic countries, particularly in Egypt and Syria. Also because of growing religiosity, many families started watching Arab and Persian satellite TV channels broadcast from the Middle East, including Aljazeera and Alarabiyah. Hence, they were not

⁷¹ A Dervish, blog by Dariush Rajabian, accessible at <http://dariussthoughtland.blogspot.com/>

⁷² Mihanparast, *Ҳушдори Раҳмон аз расидани қиёмат* (Rahman's warning of resurrection), published on April 18, 2008, accessed at http://sadoimehanparast.blogspot.com/2008_04_13_archive.html

impartial about the fate of Muslim nations that they would call their religious brethren. Even now, lots of young Tajiks on Facebook, who are more religious than before, closely monitor the developments in Egypt, Syria and Iran. For instance, after the Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi's ouster in the beginning of July 2013, many young religious Tajiks sympathetic to him and his party al-Ikhwan-al-moslemin started posting photos of Mohammed Morsi on their profiles. They even created a group called "We are with Morsi" with more than 350 members.⁷³

Of course, Tajikistan is too far from Egypt, Libya, Syria or even Turkey for those countries to have a direct impact. But, like other Central Asian countries it shares some cultural commonalities with these countries: all are predominantly Muslim and ruled by long-lasting autocratic leaders that have concentrated power in the hands of tiny groups of supporters and suppress any voices of dissent; all are believed to have corrupt government institutions and leaders that turn their countries into family enterprises. In the words of Fabio Indeo, researcher of geopolitics in University of Camerino, Italy, countries of Central Asia share problems that make them prone to vast uprisings, although the lack of strong media and opposition limits the revolutionary potential. Moreover, according to him, Russia and China would not let such revolutions happen in the countries under their influence.

In an essay published in the internet journal of *Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics*, he wrote the following: "Central Asian presidents are deeply worried about the potential contagion and effects of the "Arab Spring" events in their countries – which could spark a democratisation process aimed to modify the political status quo - mainly because they fear to lose their power: moreover, the potential overthrow of their secular governments, a following condition of prolonged instability and uncertainty could draw up a kind of power vacuum which radical Islamist forces could dangerously fill."⁷⁴

According to various sources, around 41,000 Tajiks use Facebook which is comparatively lower than Kyrgyzstan (with more than 109,000) and Uzbekistan (with 152,000). But, relatively speaking, discussions on Tajik pages of Facebook are fiercer and hotter than those of Uzbek and Kyrgyz groups. In fact, Facebook has become a battlefield between the advocates of change, opponents of President Rahman, and his supporters who want to preserve status quo in Tajikistan.

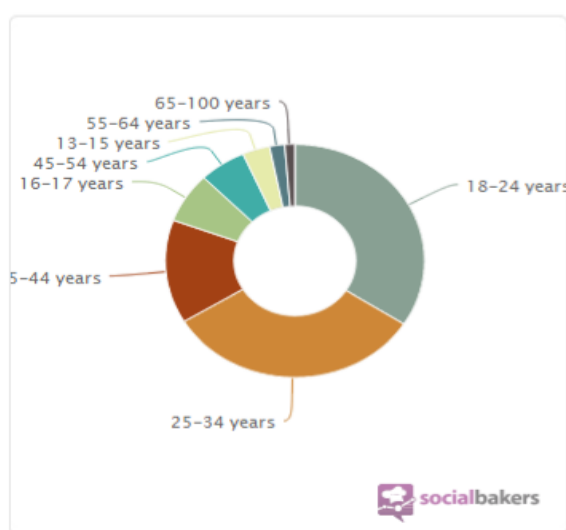
⁷³ A Tajik discussion group in Facebook "Мо бо Мурсӣ ҳастем"(We are with Morsi) is accessible at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/549849405078880/>

⁷⁴ An "Arab Spring" scenario in Central Asia? By Fabio Indeo published in the journal *Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics* on 10 July 2012, accessed at <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/an-%E2%80%9Ccarab-spring%E2%80%9D-scenario-in-central-asia/1925>

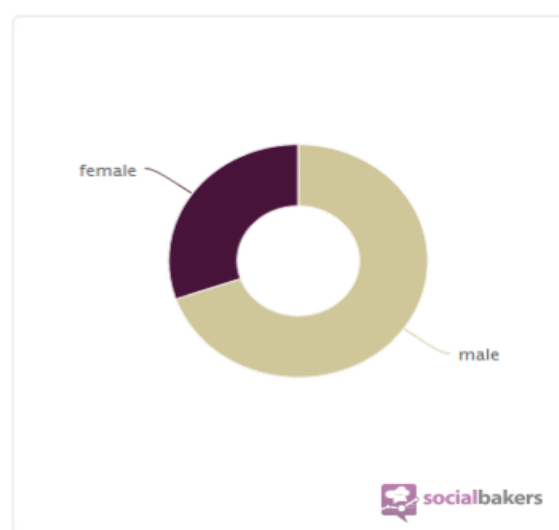
According to SocialBakers, the largest age group of Facebook users in Tajikistan are young people of 18-24 years of age, followed by people of 24-34 years of age. There are 70 per cent male users and 30 per cent female users, illustrating a great gender disparity.⁷⁵

With the growing number of Tajik Facebook users over the past three years, the number of Facebook discussion groups has also grown steadily. Now there are more Tajik discussion groups on Facebook than ever. Lots of governance and corruption issues are being discussed, people have started to question and criticize the government by using social media as an easy platform for debate and conversation. Prior to this, Tajiks were quite active in Russian social networks such as *Moy Mir*, *Mail.ru* and *Odnoklasniki*, but these tools were used more for entertainment, such as making new friends or sharing pictures with other members. *Facebook* however, is not just a place to meet new friends, it has become a

User age distribution



Male/Female User Ratio



Tajikistan Facebook demographics is other social media statistics we monitor. The largest age group is currently **18-24**, followed by the users in the age of **25-34**.

There are **70% male** users and **30% female** users in **Tajikistan**, compared to 46% and 54% in **Aruba** and 48% and 52% in **Isle of Man**.

platform for conversation, discussion and debate about politics, culture and religion. Owners of this social network write the following about their mission:

*“Founded in 2004, Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.”*⁷⁶

One of the advantages of Facebook is that it is hosted overseas and cannot be controlled by Tajik authorities. It also provides opportunities for anonymous writing.

The most popular discussion groups among Tajiks on Facebook are *Tajikistan Online*, *Platforma*, *Zaban-e Parsi*, *New Tajikistan*, *Intellectuals Club of Tajikistan*, *Union for the transparency of the election in Tajikistan*, *Voice of the Migrants*, *Coalition for the Democracy and Civil Society*, *Journalists of Tajikistan*, *Media.tj*, *Compatriots* and most

⁷⁵ SocialBakers, Tajikistan Facebook Statistics, accessed at <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/tajikistan>

⁷⁶ Facebook Newsroom: Key facts about Facebook, accessed at <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts>

recently *Freethinking*. The number of *Tajikistan Online* group members reached beyond 12 thousand on July 8, 2013. Another active group, *Platforma*, which contains posts mainly in Russian, but also in Persian (Tajik), reached about 8,700 members. The third largest group is *Zaban-e Parsi* with about 6.5 thousand members, who mainly discuss problems related to the Persian language in Tajikistan. The main objective of its members is to bring back the Persian alphabet in Tajikistan.⁷⁷

It seems that lots of young people are also interested in studying abroad, as a group called *Tajik-British College in Dushanbe* has more than 4500 members, making it the fourth largest Tajik group on Facebook. A group called *Electronic Library* has more than 3,700 members. A group dedicated to poems of the late popular poet Laeq Shirali has more than 3,000 members, which proves that people are interested in his poetry. In comparison, the largest Kyrgyz group in Facebook, *Kyrgyz club*, has more than 4,200 members, the second *Wikipedia – Kyrgyz People and History of Great Nation* has more than 3,500 members. Very few Kyrgyz groups have less than 500 and most of them even less than 100 members. This is the case despite the fact that internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan is considered to be almost triple high of Tajikistan. This proves greater engagement of Tajiks in social media, particularly in discussion groups on Facebook, compared to its neighbours who have easier and cheaper access to the internet.

There are some groups dedicated to the forthcoming presidential election in Tajikistan. One of them is the *Union for the Transparency of Election-2013* which has more than 2,500 active members. Another group called *Virtual Government and Parliament of Tajikistan* has more than 2,200 members. Interestingly, the influential opposition Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan, with about 2,000 members, is larger than the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan's group, which has only 729 members - even fewer than those of the group created by the opposition *Vatandar Movement* with 763 members.

On the other hand, many of these groups are not very active, as their members do not post comments on a daily basis. The most active groups are *Tajikistan Online*, *Tajikistan*, *Platforma* and *Zaban-e Parsi*. Each of them has around 100 posts a day on average. Particularly, *Platforma*, which is bilingual Russian and Persian (Tajik), has been active in discussing political issues from the very beginning when it was created two years ago. People here post caricatures, photos, videos, comments criticising Tajik president Emamali Rahman for his 'oppressive' policies and his family for monopolising all major profitable industries in Tajikistan. In summer of 2013, on the eve of November 6 presidential elections in Tajikistan moderators of this group published private family photos of President Rahman which sparked widespread debates across the social media.⁷⁸

Case 1. Operation in Kharogh

One of the key moments for social media discussions in Tajikistan was last year's Government operation in Kharogh which sparked widespread criticism and discontent. On 24 July 2012, early morning, at 4 o'clock, when population of this mountainous town were all asleep Tajik government forces, including police, military and security forces, launched a joint operation in the centre of the mountainous Badakhshan province, east of Tajikistan. This operation was launched two days after the head of the local branch of the National

⁷⁷ Забони порсӣ (Persian language) group in Facebook, accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/zabaneparsi/>

⁷⁸ Family photos of Rahman, accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/platformatj/permalink/435817119859383/>

Security Committee of Tajikistan, Abdullah Nazarov, often accused of corruption and bribery by the local population, was murdered in a clash with a group of local armed men near Kharogh, the central town of Badakhshan.⁷⁹

The operation was led by the Tajik defence minister General Shirali Khayrullayev, a close and loyal friend of President Rahman's who has been leading the defence ministry since the early 1990s when Mr Rahman came to power. On the day of the operation, authorities cut all communications with Badakhshan - even ordinary mobile phones would not answer. Many relied on news emerging through satellite communication available to some staff of international organizations in the region. Thousands of people could not communicate with their family members in Badakhshan as news of the government's assault quickly spread across the social media. The next day, many foreign tourists leaving Badakhshan brought more accounts of what was taking place in Badakhshan, including photos from the town of Kharogh after the operation.⁸⁰

When asked why all communication lines were cut down on the day of the operation, the head of the state Communication Service of Tajikistan, Bek Zuhurov, told journalists that a bullet had been shot at telephone lines and that this was the reason why all communication was cut to Badakhshan. This has quickly become a subject of mockery and anecdotes across social media. Communication was not restored quickly, despite the fact that thousands of people signed a letter to the government to restore communication after two days of the operation that left about 50 dead - mostly civilians and at least 17 government soldiers.⁸¹

Meanwhile, the carefully planned government operation was later described as a failure by many analysts. On the first day of the operation, authorities announced their main targets; four local influential 'mafia' leaders that were accused of murdering Gen. Nazarov. These are Mamadbaqer Mamadbaqerov, Taleb Ayyambekov, Imamnazar Imamnazarov and Yadgar Mamadaslamov, the first two being government officials.⁸² Ayyambekov was a commander of the border guards in the Ishkashim district and Mamadbaqerov worked for the local government. Despite the fact that the Prosecutor General of Tajikistan brought charges of murder, illegal possession of arms and organising a criminal group against them, so far no one of them has been detained - although a year has passed since the operation. Imamnazar Imamnazarov, who was also disabled over the past several years, was killed in a blast in his home one month after the operation on 22 August.⁸³

Soon after news of the operation had spread across social media and people had been unable to communicate with their relatives in Badakhshan, tens of hundreds of people started protesting near the Tajik Embassies in Moscow and some other parts of the world. Many oppositional political parties and groups issued statements and condemned the operation against a peaceful population. Campaigns against the operation were launched in social

⁷⁹ BBC News Asia, Tajikistan clashes: 'Many dead' in Gorno-Badakhshan, published on 24 July 2012, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18965366>

⁸⁰ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, photo album published on 28 July 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/07/120728_zkh_album_badakhshan_operation.shtml

⁸¹ BBC Persian (Tajik) page report published on 26 July 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/07/120726_zkh_connection_badakhshan_operation.shtml

⁸² BBC Persian (Tajik) report published on 28 July 2012, accesses at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/07/120728_ea_hostages_kharogh.shtml

⁸³ BBC News Asia, Tajikistan police fire on protesters, news published on 22 August 2012, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19347575>

networks such as Facebook. Everybody called on the government to withdraw troops from Badakhshan. A special page *Stop the Military Action in Kharogh*⁸⁴ and a special discussion group *Badakhshan too is a part of Tajikistan* (БАДАХШОН ҲАМ ТОҶИКИСТОН АСТ) with 550 members was launched on Facebook, where lots of people discussed the situation in Badakhshan with more and more condemnations and critical opinions about the government.⁸⁵

Apart from social media discussions, lots of videos later emerged in YouTube which brought light about what had been going on in Kharogh on the day of operation followed by protests of local population afterwards. One mobile video showed pictures of dead civilians and soldiers, destroyed homes and shops with people distressed and grieved. Another mobile video apparently taken from a soldier showed how government forces, mainly young soldiers were desperately and chaotically shooting at civilian homes. A voice is heard insulting the local population and ordering soldiers to shoot at a window and at a two-storey building, where ‘there was a flashlight’. A cloud of billowing grey smoke is seen rising in a house behind garden trees.⁸⁶ A video showed a few number of local men some of whom were armed with Kalashnikov rifle in a road blocked with stones. They run away with a sound of shooting and moments later one of them is seen shot and injured. This video also showed helicopters flying over the town and soldiers walking over the hill while shooting at the direction of the town. Photos of dead bodies of soldiers left with a broken armoured troop carrier, a completely destroyed and burned house, emerged soon after the operation.⁸⁷



The mountainous Badakhshan Province has its own peculiarities that set it apart from the rest of Tajikistan: the majority of people there follow the Ismailia sect of Shia Islam,

⁸⁴ Stop the Military Action in Khorog, a page in Facebook, accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/StopTheMilitaryActionInKhorog>

⁸⁵ Facebook Groups: БАДАХШОНҲАМ ТОҶИКИСТОН АСТ (Badakhshan too is part of Tajikistan), accessible at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/428121103905128>

⁸⁶ War in Pamir, a video in Youtube, published on 14 November, 2012, accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=h7FXgGrWHs0

⁸⁷ Horrible shootings in Kharogh, published on 28 July, 2012, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfirT2ziAHs>

contrary to the rest of Tajiks, who mainly follow the Hanafi sect of Sunni Islam. People in the province also speak a variety of languages that differ from Persian, the language mainly spoken in Tajikistan. A mountainous region with poor road and communication infrastructures and limited trade opportunities, it is one of the least economically disadvantaged parts of Tajikistan.

Because of its long and poorly guarded border with Afghanistan, it is also one of the major routes of drug smuggling to Tajikistan. Over the past 20 years, the government have not paid enough attention to the problems of the local population, who has mainly relied on remittances from labour migrants in Russia and charity and development projects coordinated by the Agha Khan Foundation, which claims to work 'towards the vision of an economically dynamic, politically stable, intellectually vibrant and culturally tolerant Tajikistan.'⁸⁸

On 24 July 2013 a campaign started in Facebook to mark the first anniversary of the government's operation in Kharogh. On the eve of this event hundreds of Tajik Facebook users put a picture of a black ribbon on their profiles. The cyber campaign had a widespread resonance in the real world as well. Hundreds of residents of Kharogh attended 'remembrance day' ceremony by visiting the graveyard of more twenty local young people killed in the government operation a year ago. Similar remembrance ceremonies were held in Moscow, Russia, and other foreign countries where Tajik labour migrants and students, especially those coming from Badakhshan, attended. Opposition politician Rahmatilla Zayirov, who is quite popular in Badakhshan region, issued a statement condemning the government's operation in Kharogh as "act of state terrorism."⁸⁹

He was later summoned to the office of the Prosecutor General to explain his accusations. He later wrote on his Facebook page that in response to investigators' questions he had proved his claims 'based on Tajik legislature and international human rights standards' that the Kharogh operation was indeed an act of state terrorism. Authorities did not file any law suit against him. Contrarily, after the November 6 presidential election, following his swearing in ceremony, President Rahman dismissed the defence minister General Sherali Khayrullayev of his post. Khayrullayev, according to government sources, was the mastermind or the initiator of the military operation in Kharogh on 24 July 2012 that left about 50 dead and many more injured.

Case 2. Free Zayd Saidov!

Over the past year, public discontent continued to grow in all parts of Tajikistan. About one month after the operation in Kharogh, centre of Badakhshan province, an opposition alliance called "Group 24" was formed by a number of groups opposing President Rahman's regime.⁹⁰ One week later, in a statement addressed to the whole nation, the group led by the former businessman and owner of the company "Faraz-Tajiran" Umarali Quvvatov, called for civil disobedience. He called on people not to 'tolerate widespread corruption, poverty, human rights abuse and oppression' by the government of Tajikistan.⁹¹ This and a series of

⁸⁸ Aga Khan Development Network, AKDN in Tajikistan, accessed at <http://www.akdn.org/tajikistan.asp>

⁸⁹ Р. Зойиров: Президент амалиёти Хоруғро "террори давлати" эътироф кунад (President should recognize the operation in Kharogh as act of state terrorism), accessed at <http://hsdtaj.org/tj/?p=159>

⁹⁰ BBC Persian (Tajik) report about the establishment of new opposition alliance Group 24, published on 22 august 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/08/120822_mm_committee24.shtml

⁹¹ BBC Persian (Tajik) report published on 27 August 2012, accessed at

events later, such as the detention of former businessman and opposition leader Umarali Quvvatov in Dubai in December 2012, the detention of the former PM and rival of President Rahman in the 1994 presidential election, Abdumalek Abdullajanov, in Ukraine in February 2013 (he was later released as he had US residency permit), also contributed to the growing debates and discussions on Tajik groups of Facebook.

The most recent of such developments was the detention of famous businessman and former communication minister Zayd Saidov during his return from Frankfurt on May 18, 2013. His detention followed his previous announcement that he would establish a political party named Tajikistan-e Naw (New Tajikistan). Although he ruled out the possibility of his party's competition in the then forthcoming presidential election in November 2013, authorities have been suspicious about him. He was initially accused of corruption, bribery and fraud,⁹² later charges of polygamy and raping an underage girl was brought against him by the Anti-corruption agency.

Many Facebook users condemned his detention, accusing the Tajik authorities of persecuting the opponents of Mr. Rahman. Hundreds of Facebook users started putting Zayd Saidov's photo on their profiles. Most recently, a number of young political activists in Moscow organised a campaign where they distributed t-shirts bearing photos of Zayd Saidov and a slogan "Free Zaid Saidov!" Their photos have been circulating widely on the pages of Facebook. Saidov's case is still a continuing debate in Tajik groups on Facebook. For instance, with the coming of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, hundreds of Tajik users of Facebook wrote prayers for the 'liberation' of Zayd Saidov and the 'return of justice'. A group in support of Zayd Saidov with more than 300 members was later created in Facebook.⁹³

Meanwhile, by the time I was editing this report, on 19 November 2013, his lawyers showed journalists a real DNA test results obtained from a centre in Moscow which disproves claims by authorities that Zayd Saidov fathers a child of a woman he allegedly raped several years ago. The lawyers accused Anti-corruption agency officials of falsifying the document issued by the same DNA test centre. Video of Russian doctors showing the real document also were given to journalists and emerged in YouTube.⁹⁴ This sparked another wave of discussions in the pages of Facebook.

Case 3. Poet's Return

Another hot topic of discussion among Tajik users of Facebook is the return of the famous poet Bazar Saber from America.⁹⁵ He was one of the leaders of the independence movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He was the harshest critic of the communist party and the soviet regime and one of the first active members of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan. He left Tajikistan right after the civil war had started in autumn 1992. He lived in the US for

http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/08/120827_mm_statement_group24.shtml

⁹² IWPR, Emerging Force in Tajik Politics Arrested, published on 20 May 2013, accessed at <http://iwpr.net/report-news/emerging-force-tajik-politics-arrested>

⁹³ Facebook Groups, ДИФОЪ АЗ ЗАЙД САИД (Defend Zayd Said) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/533965860005050/>

⁹⁴ Youtube, ДНК "БиоПАПА", Video of Russian doctors testing Zayd Saidov's DNA for allegedly fathering a child, accessed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ze7NVnFwCtk

⁹⁵ ASIA-Plus website, Bozor Sobir returns to Tajikistan, reported on 28 May 2013, accessed at <http://news.tj/en/news/bozor-sobir-returns-tajikistan>

over 15 years. Over the past few years, he visited Tajikistan several times, but did not want to remain there. This time he visited Tajikistan 'at the personal invitation' of President Rahman. The 75 year old poet told journalists upon his arrival in Dushanbe airport at the end of May 2013 that "this time I have come here to die, because a grave in USA costs \$10,000 and cremation costs \$7000."⁹⁶

This time Bazar Saber was welcomed by officials of the ministry of culture of Tajikistan, writers and poets, as well as intellectuals at the airport. He said he was satisfied this time, because he was received 'in such a formal way by officials'. But lots of ordinary people and journalists, who would go to the airport to welcome him in his previous visits, were disappointed. Because he said that he had come to bring all intellectuals together around the president Emamali Rahman and work for the future of the nation. His return on the even of the presidential election is seen by many as a way of propaganda for President Rahman, because as a national poet he has public appeal and popularity. In fact, he published a number of poems in praise of the president, even congratulated him for his victory in election by writing a poem that was widely circulated and sparked debates across the social media. He had previously suggested that the only religious party, the Islamic Rebirth Party, major opposition party in Tajikistan, be abolished. Upon his return he again stressed that "there are many unnecessary political parties in Tajikistan."⁹⁷

The most interesting fact about Bazar Saber is that he was the most active anti-communist poet in the 1990s and that he even said in one his televised speeches then that he had been fighting against the communist regime for 25 years. This changed after he moved to the US where he has lived since the end of the 1990s. Over the past fifteen years, he sent his pro-communist and anti-imperialist and even anti-American poems to Tajikistan, some of which were published in independent newspapers in Tajikistan. He even wrote new poems in praise of Stalin. Many called him a crazy poet who had no firm stance in any ideology. Many accused him of inciting the Civil War in the early 1990s with his anti-communist poems, who now ought to apologise.

But many still liked him until recently when he said in one of his articles that Lenin was a thousand times better than any prophet. This sparked widespread criticism and condemnation from among the religious part of the population, including many of journalists and politicians with pro-Islamic views. In the realm of social media, discussions and debates about Bazar Saber's statements never stop. Some discussion threads contain 300 to 600 posts. Many young Islamist Tajiks condemn him again and again by posting new comments accusing him of blasphemy.

One young lady with headscarf who also writes poems said, "I will no more read Bazar's poems, and will no more respect him as a national poet, because of his blasphemous poems, he is dead for me." Another young Islamist said he should go back to America, as the 'holy land of Muslims (Tajikistan) cannot tolerate his presence here any longer."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ BBC Persian (Tajik) report published on 30 May 2013, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2013/05/130530_mm_rahman_bazaar_sabir.shtml

⁹⁷ Millat newspaper website, ХНИТ баста мешавад ё бозсозӣ? (Will IRPT be closed or reconstructed?), published on 23 March 2011, accessed at <http://www.millat.tj/musohiba/2430-hnit-basta-meshavad-yo-bozsozi.html>

⁹⁸ Facebook Groups, ПЛИАТФОРМА (Platforma), a thread about Bazar Saber, started on June 5, 2013, accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/platformatj/permalink/422914464482982/>

Yet, for many who are not supporters of Islam, it was his praise for President Rahman that was irritating. For them, it was not important that he was anti-Islam or wanted the Islamic party to be banned. Even Muhieddin Kabiri, leader of the Islamic Rebirth Party, who also is one of his distant relatives, said in an interview that he was not angered by what Bazar Saber said about his party, “Poets are emotional, and one can expect such controversial statements from poets such as Bazar Saber”, he said with apparent intention to soften the anger of his supporters.⁹⁹

One of the most scandalous reactions to his return was an article by the Russian-speaking local journalist Olga Tutubalina, published in the Asia-Plus newspaper two days after Bazar Saber's return on 30 May. In her article entitled “Unintelligently about Intelligentsia” she criticised Bazar Saber for 'flattering' and praising President Rahman and cited a famous statement by Lenin about intelligentsia. In a letter to Russian writer Maxim Gorky in September 15, 1919, Vladimir Lenin, the founder of Soviet Union, said: "The intellectuals, the lackeys of capital, who think they're the brains of the nation. In fact they're not its brains, they're its shit."¹⁰⁰

A paragraph of her article read: “In fairness, I note that Bazar is the most unexpected, but not the only representative of the Tajik intelligentsia, that type of intelligentsia so clearly described by Vladimir Ilyich. Reflections of this are the shameful meetings of the intelligentsia with the President: only Rahman speaks and representatives of the so-called conscience of the nation (intelligentsia), at best, keep silent and humbly downcast their eyes; at worst they start to beg (him for money or assistance). Does that sound demeaning? Believe me, looking at this situation is even more humiliating ...”¹⁰¹

Following the publication of this article, a number of writers, doctors and teachers who considered themselves part of the intelligentsia made a lawsuit against journalist Olga Tutubalina. This caused widespread debate and war of words between the supporters of the government and intelligentsia and their pro-change opponents on Facebook.¹⁰²

Case 4. Cross-Media case: Wedding Video

In fact, Facebook has recently become a battlefield between Tajiks. Previously silent, many pro-government users with anonymous names and even fake photos have recently started assaults on opposition groups and users who criticise Rahman's policies. This followed another scandalous case which was not related to Facebook alone, but also to cross-media.

Slander and name-calling are common in the Tajik pages of Facebook. Nevertheless, these online clashes between heavy-handed opponents of President Rahman and furious pro-government activists have recently intensified after a scandalous wedding video of the

⁹⁹ Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan's website Nahzat.tj published excerpts of its leader Muhieddin Kabiri's interview with local newspaper Negaah about Bazar Saber on 15 June 2013, accessed at <http://www.nahzat.tj/nahzat/siyosat/item/8998-muhiddin-kabiri-dar-borai-bozor-sobir>

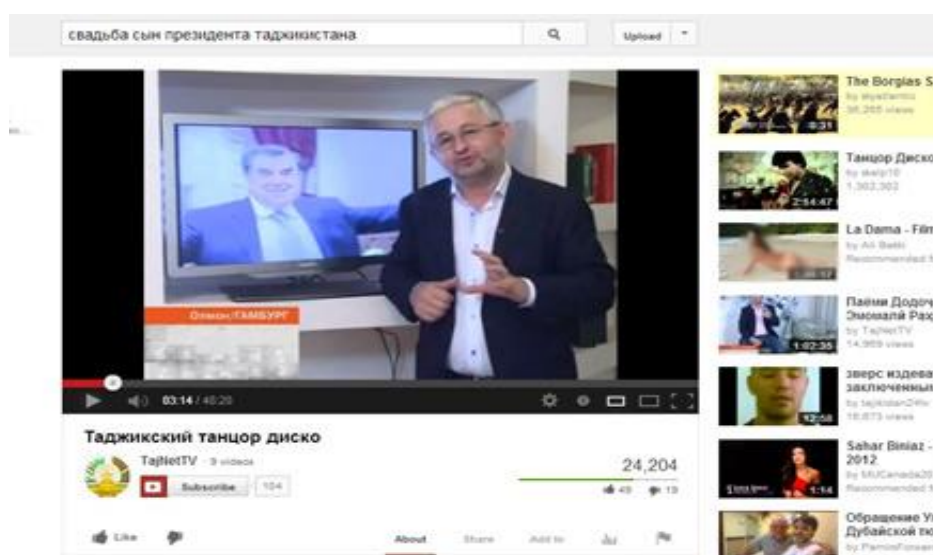
¹⁰⁰ Letter from Lenin to Gorky, US Library of Congress, accessed at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/g2aleks.html>

¹⁰¹ ASIA-Plus website, Неинтеллигентно об интеллигенции (Unintelligently about Intelligentsia), article by journalist Olga Tutubalina published on 30 May 2013, accessed at <http://news.tj/tj/node/146951>

¹⁰² An article by Ata Mirkhajeh (against Tutubalina) was published in state newspaper Jumhuriyat on 11 June 2013; shared in Facebook, accessed <https://www.facebook.com/groups/platformatj/permalink/425650500876045/>

President's son was broadcast on regional K+ TV and circulated on YouTube.¹⁰³

Parts of this video which was filmed in 2009 were accessible on YouTube before, but at the end of May, dissident journalist and leader of an opposition group in exile Vatandar, Dadajan Atavollah, broadcast the full video on K+ TV at the end of May 2013. He had an agreement with K+ TV to broadcast a series of programmes aimed at the politics in Tajikistan during the campaign for the presidential election in November this year. Rahman's wedding video was one of the first of such programmes and in it, the President appears drunk, singing and dancing.¹⁰⁴



At one point in this video, after the head of the state-owned radio and TV committee whispers something to President Rahman's ear, he looks at his watch and motions for guests to leave, only to suddenly stop them moments later, calling them back to their seats because they haven't been 'served the main dish.' Atavollah, who comments in between various episodes of the video, says "he cannot manage his own son's wedding party, how can he manage a country such as Tajikistan?"

A journalist and leader of the opposition movement Vatandar, Atavollah has lived in exile in Moscow for the 21 years Rahman has held power. He also used the video's broadcast as a chance to criticise Rahman for widespread corruption, accusing him of turning Tajikistan into a family enterprise and not to mention violating a law that was initiated and signed by the president himself in 2007 to regulate spending on weddings and other ceremonies.

Habib Said, a Tajik labour migrant who lives in Orenburg, Russia, told me the following: "Atavollah opened the way of water, and it is no more possible to block its way. The (wedding video) has seriously changed the public opinion within two weeks. Discussions on Facebook will not have direct impact on government officials, because they are experienced (in hearing criticisms) but it will change the way young people think, and removes fear from their heart and minds. If this trend continues with such a speed, serious changes may happen

¹⁰³ My blog at BBC Media Action website, Social media in Tajikistan: a battlefield, published on 18 June 2013, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/posts/Social-media-in-Tajikistan-a-battlefield->

¹⁰⁴ Dadajan Atavollah's broadcast of Tajik president's son's wedding video in K+ TV, also published in YouTube, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpiQ3Xo-Fdo>

within the next one year and a half.”¹⁰⁵

According to him, new generation emerges as the time of those in power is coming to end. And elections may serve as turning points for such transformation.

The wedding video has indeed sparked widespread reaction across social media as well as inside the government. An anonymous government official told me at that time that everybody had been discussing this video on all levels of government. A number of local TV journalists were detained, questioned and later released on the charge of complicity in spreading the video. The number of pro-government users with fake names and photos increased on Facebook after the broadcast of this video. Discussions about it still continue on the pages of Facebook.

After the broadcast of this video and a number of local officials in northern Panjakent district went to see Atavollah's old mother in her village. They asked her to persuade her son not to criticise the president. Later her video appeared in Yandex.ru named “Counsels (rather last will) of Atavollah's mother to her son” in which an actress read a text written on behalf of a mother reproaching her son for being ungrateful to a ‘president who brought peace’ to everybody's home.¹⁰⁶ Owners of some DVD shops told that officials brought this video so that it is sold and distributed everywhere. Contrarily, DVDs of Atavollah's broadcast of wedding video were also sold privately in northern Sogdian and Badakhshan regions, where President has less popularity than other regions.

State owned newspapers, such as *Jumhuriyat* and *Seda-ye Mardom*, reacted to the wedding video broadcast by filling their pages with articles against Atavollah. The headline of one of such articles accused Atavollah's father of stealing pensions in his village when he was young and alive (Pesar-e nafaqadozd – literally: Son of a pension stealer). This article was also published in the website of the state news agency “Khaavar” too.¹⁰⁷ A source from a military unit in northern Tajikistan told me that commanders decided to distribute this article among soldiers. Under pressure from authorities or otherwise, even some independent newspapers, such as *Farazh*, published numerous articles criticising Atavollah for the broadcast of President's son's wedding video.

Case 5. Anti-opposition campaign

Pro-government activists started a campaign to defame opposition politicians, especially Mr Atavollah. A fake page of Atavollah's mother was created in Facebook with posting ‘condemning’ her son. A fake Facebook page was created on behalf of Atavollah himself as well along with his photo-shopped caricature portrait. A similar page was created in the name of the leader of the Social-Democratic party of Tajikistan, Rahmatilla Zayirov, who was also considered to be the main opponent of Rahman in the November 6 presidential election. He later warned Facebook users not to add a fake page in his name in a statement in his original Facebook page.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ My own interview via Facebook

¹⁰⁶ Video named “Counsel of Atavollah's mother to her son” was published in Yandex on 24 July 2013, accessed at <http://video.yandex.ru/users/smitohn/view/1/?ncrmd=3815#>

¹⁰⁷ State newspaper *Jumhuriyat*, Писари Нафакадузд, published on 01 August 2013, accessed at http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=11452

¹⁰⁸ Original Facebook page of Tajikistan's Social-Democratic Party leader, Rahmatilla Zayirov, accessed at

In July 2013, a user nicknamed Saleh Hatamiyan published a number of sex videos of a local imam of some mosque but wrote the name of Islamic Rebirth Party leader Muhieddin Kabiri and his deputy Mahmatali Hayit under the video posts. Later it was reported that the videos belonged to a local imam, who lost his mobile phone after filming his private relation with his wife. This was used by pro-government anonymous Facebook users to criticise mullahs and Islamists for 'preaching one thing, and doing another.' However, many believe, that by using such means of propaganda against Mullahs and religious leaders, the security forces in fact targeted the Islamic Rebirth Party leaders indirectly to warn of possible suppression if they ever wanted to protest against the government.

*Young journalist Daleer Ghofran who is also active in Facebook, wrote me: "I think the government turned its tactic from defence to attack. Previously they used to block Facebook, now they decided to engage more in social media and fight the battle by creating fake accounts than keeping themselves aside. Therefore, tens of hundreds of such fake accounts have become active in Facebook to defend the government's position, although not very successfully. Maybe one manages tens of such accounts."*¹⁰⁹

In fact, on the eve of the November presidential election the state TVs and newspapers started a propaganda campaign against the Islamic Rebirth Party and some influential religious personalities, such as Haji Akbar Turajanzadeh. In August 2013, state TVs broadcast a series of programmes as part of the president's travels to various towns and districts. In these TV programs residents of different towns and districts, especially old men, requested to ban Islamic Rebirth Party (IRPT) which is the only religious party in Tajikistan. "Islam does not need a political party, they said, our prophet had never had a party." Some alleged former members of the Islamic Rebirth shown on TVs said that they were forced by IRPT leaders to join this party.

Islamic party leaders denied these accusations and stated that their members were forced to appear on TVs to give testimonies by the KGB (security committee) officials. Leader of Islamic Rebirth Party Muhieddin Kabiri wrote a complaint to the head of the State Radio and TV Committee, who responded that 'people are free to express their opinions.' Such repeated programmes with participation of people from different parts of Tajikistan accusing the major opposition party of frauds and calling for its ban were unprecedented at least since the time of peace agreement in Tajikistan.¹¹⁰

Case 6. "You want war!"

Supporters of Mr Rahman always use war rhetoric to warn his opponents of any kind of protests. They usually remind people of the Civil War brutalities of the early 1990s and say that they don't want such a war again. Advocates of change say that people have the right to protest and, if the government does not shoot at them, there will be no war.

One such user - nicknamed "Umniy Business" (literally: Clever business) - published a comment describing how government uses war rhetoric to curb any possible protest and disobedience. He named it "The dialogue of the people and the government of Tajikistan":

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100005331363709&ref=ts>

¹⁰⁹ My own interview

¹¹⁰ Azadegan website, Response of State TV and Radio Committee to Muhieddin Kabiri, published on August 7, 2013, accessed at <http://www.ozodagon.com/11649-posuhi-kumitai-radio-va-televizion-ba-muiddin-kabir.html>

*"People: "We want change"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We are tired of labour migration"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want to live in our homeland"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want jobs in Tajikistan"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want freedom of doing business"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want the electricity"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want hot water and heating"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want competent officials"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want to enforce laws"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We want fair and democratic elections"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "See how people live in the developed countries"
 Government: "Look how they live in Somalia and Afghanistan"
 People: "We do not want to look at the backward countries; we want to look at the developed ones"
 Government: "You want war"
 People: "We do not want war; we want to change our government under the law and Constitution"
 Government: "You want war"
 What kind of government do we have? Why do the authorities have just one answer to all questions? Do we need such a government?"¹¹¹*

On the eve of presidential election, calls for change of power were intensified among the Tajikistani users of Facebook and other social networks. Some social media users used caricatures of President Rahman to show how ‘ineffective and corrupt’ leader he was and how he turned Tajikistan into his own family enterprise by appointing his friends and relatives to higher posts. Some users would point to his ‘long lasting autocratic rule’ and compared it with that of Libya’s Mo’ammr Qaddafi and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak overthrown by popular uprisings, usually called “Arab Spring.” One Tajik Facebook user nicknamed Ravshan Rahagar wrote the following about President Rahman in his Facebook page on 10 July 2013:

"He had 21 years to make changes, but did nothing. He was brought to power by Russia and Uzbekistan. He was a puppet and remains the same. He could put an end to civil war in 1993 to prevent the deaths of thousands of people, but he did not. During every election, he made ambitious promises. He promised to solve

¹¹¹ A status update by Facebook user nicknamed Umniy Business on June 30, 2013, accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=397345720382557&set=a.353217024795427.1073741826.100003213984049&type=1&theater>

the energy crisis in Tajikistan. In 2007, he bowed down to the people and said that in four years they would have no more energy crisis, but six year has passed and he did nothing.

21 years have passed and corruption was not rooted out, but became deeply routed in Tajikistan. Breeders of corruption are Rahman himself, his children, his relatives, brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws, brides and bridegrooms, his and his wife's relatives and cousins. In 21 years, Tajikistan has not become a safe place for investors, everybody lost their money and property - Rahman's family seized it. In 21 years, Tajikistan's relationships with its neighbours have not improved, but deteriorated. He promoted regionalism. He gave all key posts to his relatives and people from his own birthplace. He put the army in the hands of an old dombra-playing man who has never been able to modernise it. Tajikistan's army is the weakest in the region now.

In 21 years, Tajikistan has become more and more dependent on Russia. He gave the best space observatory facility to Russia. On the eve of election he will agree to extend the presence of the Russian military base here for another 29 years just to save his own power with Putin's support. In 21 years, he was not able to regain lands of Tajiks elsewhere, but himself sold 1000 hectares of Tajik lands to China. He had 21 years of chances, golden chances, but lost them. He did nothing. Can he do anything in another seven years?¹¹²

Inspired by calls for change of power in social media, a group called Jonbesh-e Milli-e Tajikistan (National Movement of Tajikistan) already announced on Facebook that it would support the candidacy of Rahmatilla Zayirov, during the November presidential election. It called for all opposition groups too to support the candidacy of Zayirov, a lawyer and leader of the Social-Democratic Party, who was also President's advisor in early 2000s and later resigned.

Most of supporters of Zayirov came from among the elite Russian-speaking urban population as well as young specialists, businessmen, journalists and intellectuals. He and his party members are too intellectual and far from people, - a Facebook user told me, - so he is not very popular, although he is the only political figure inside Tajikistan that openly criticizes Rahman's policies. In fact, Zayirov had several times questioned the legitimacy of Rahman's presidency by accusing him of violation of the Constitution. Both ahead of presidential election in 2006 and in 2013 he wrote that Rahman had no right to nominate himself for presidency again, because transitional regulations in the Constitution held that one and the same person can become president twice only after the powers of the acting president terminates and new president takes oath. But Rahman, according to him, was nominated and elected as president in 2006 before his powers ending and another president taking oath. Authorities have never responded to his allegations seriously; only a few pro-government lawyers said that 'only parliament has the right to explain laws.'¹¹³

Therefore, Rahmatilla Zayirov was seen as a main challenger of President Rahman on the

¹¹² A status update by Facebook user nicknamed Ravshan Rahagar, published on July 10, 2013, accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/rrahagar/posts/1387143861504988>

¹¹³ Decision by the Political Council of the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan on boycotting the 6 November presidential election in Tajikistan on 31 October, accessed at <http://hsdtaj.org/tj/?p=428>

eve of the 2013 presidential elections. Many social media activists had been hopeful last summer that this time all opposition groups would nominate his candidacy to the presidential election. He himself also was hopeful and actively used Facebook and other social media to spread his words by publishing his statements and decisions taken by his party.

Case 7. Post-Rahman reform plan

When I returned from Oxford in the middle of July 2013, there were already some changes taking place in the political sphere in Tajikistan. On August 2013, weeks before the date of the presidential election was announced by the parliament, a number of opposition groups and parties, led by the Islamic Rebirth Party and the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan, were holding weekly meetings to establish an opposition alliance against the government of Emamali Rahman. Zayirov was considered to be the main initiator of establishing such an alliance. Ahead of the presidential election in 2006 he made an alliance with a number of opposition groups and non-registered parties, but was not allowed to be nominated. This time the major opposition Islamic Rebirth Party with more than 40 thousand members also joined the attempts to create an opposition alliance against Rahman. They named their alliance the Union of Reformist Forces (URF) which also prepared and adopted the so-called post-Rahman democratic reform plan in Tajikistan.¹¹⁴

They came to the agreement that a single opposition candidate, whoever he/she would be, would accomplish the reform plan in four years, if he or she won the election for another seven year term. They envisaged that their candidate, in case of victory in the November 6 presidential elections, would pave the way for a referendum to amend the Constitution to reduce the presidential term from seven to four years, would dissolve the parliament and announce another presidential election in four years' time, in which he/she would not participate as a candidate. They said that their candidate would be a 'transitional president' if he or she won the election.¹¹⁵

Many analysts said that Zayirov, if nominated, could become a real challenger to Rahman with the support of the Islamic Rebirth Party, because his own party with a little more than 7,000 members was not powerful or popular enough. However, days after the election campaign had started, the hidden conflict between the two parties was unmasked. As the main player, activists of the Islamic Rebirth Party did not support Zayirov's candidacy. Instead, on September 9, 2013, they nominated the candidacy of lawyer Aynahal Babanazarova in an apparent attempt to show the public that Tajik Islamists are progressive enough to see a lady as their president. Babanazarova for many years worked in the offices of international organizations in Tajikistan, such as the OSCE and the SOROS Foundation, but for many analysts, she was not popular enough among the broader population.

"Babanazarova is a competent human rights activist; she enjoys respect in professional circles and among intellectuals. But the elections are too soon, and it is unlikely that she can gain sufficient popularity, especially in the provinces, where the electorate is not engaged in politics," Tajik political expert Parviz

¹¹⁴ BBC Persian (Tajik) page report on the formation of a new opposition alliance, published on 27 July 2013, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2013/07/130727_ea_union_for_change.shtml

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

*Mullajanov told EurasiaNet.org, a website operated by the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute.*¹¹⁶

In the words of John Heathershaw of Exeter Central Asian Studies Network, whilst Babanazarova's candidacy might have been a complex tale of gender politics, it was a no less a problematic story of electoral and party politics. That the Islamic Revival and Social Democratic parties have together formed the Union of Reformist Forces of Tajikistan to support her candidacy, he thinks, indicated that presidential elections presented a threat to the opposition parties. In his blog entitled 'What does a female presidential candidate in Tajikistan tell us about gender equality?', Heathershaw further writes:

*"A female candidate without a record of party politics is the least likely to face intimidation and violence from authorities during and after the elections. Not coincidentally, Bobonazarova has the added virtue of being even less of a threat to the incumbent, President Rahmon, than either Muhiddin Kabiri (of the IRPT) or Rahmatullo Zoirov (of the SDPT). She is not a viable alternative and will not be treated as such. She has even declared that, if elected, she would not serve out her term and would merely govern for a transitional period of reform."*¹¹⁷

This turn of events disappointed many opposition groups, even a lot of members of the Islamic Rebirth Party, and social media activists alike. Many Facebook users blamed Islamic Rebirth Party leader Kabiri for what they called 'disloyalty'. Dissident journalist and leader of opposition Vatandar Movement Dadajan Atavollah in his Facebook page accused IRPT leader Kabiri of 'treason'. He also sharply criticised Kabiri for not supporting Zayirov's candidacy in an interview with *Negaah* newspaper.¹¹⁸ Government officials and pro-government social media activists were thrilled by what they called a split between the opposition groups. Atavollah's interview against Kabiri was reportedly distributed among members of the Tajik parliament, the majority of whom are also members of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan led by President Rahman.

Case 8. Election boycotted

It took some time for opposition and social media activists to reorganise and support the single opposition candidate. Zayirov issued statements in support of Miss Babanazarova. Later, even Dadajan Atavollah also wrote a statement on behalf of the Vatandar Movement in support of the single opposition candidate. However, the team of Aynehal Babanazarova from the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan failed to collect enough signatures to be registered by the Central Election Commission (CEC), despite the fact that the deadline for signature collection was extended for another three days until 10 October.¹¹⁹ Opposition leaders accused the Commission of violating the rights of labour migrants to participate in signature collection, because earlier the head of the CEC Shermohammad Shahiyan had told

¹¹⁶ EurasiaNet.org, *Tajikistan: Surprise Presidential Candidate Shakes Up Political Scene*, article published on 25 September 2013, accessed at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67549>

¹¹⁷ Exeter Central Asian Studies Network, *What does a female presidential candidate in Tajikistan tell us about gender equality?* By John Heathershaw, accessed at <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/excas/the-excas-blog/what-does-a-female-presidential-candidate-in-tajikistan-tell-us-about-gender-equality/>

¹¹⁸ Interview with Dadajan Atavollah, *Negaah*, No25, 11 September 2013, accessed at <http://tojnews.tj/dodojon-atovulloev-kabiri-okhirin-umed-i-mardu-mro-kusht>

¹¹⁹ RIA Novosti, *Female Opposition Candidate Excluded From Tajikistan Poll*, 11 October 2013, accessed at <http://en.ria.ru/world/20131011/184067712/Female-Opposition-Candidate-Excluded-From-Tajikistan-Poll.html>

journalists that under the election law, signature papers would be certified only by the heads of towns and districts in Tajikistan, and so it was impossible for labour migrants in Russia to collect signatures in favour of their candidates.¹²⁰

Both traditional media including newspapers, and social networks including Facebook and Odnoklasniki have become places where these issues have been widely discussed. Leaders of some migrants' organizations in Russia also criticised the CEC for violating the law and depriving more than one million labour migrants of their rights to collect signatures and nominate their candidates. Opposition parties also requested the CEC to review their decision, but to no avail. On the day after election, observers from the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights organizations said that the CEC had violated the principle of equality during all phases of the election process by depriving labour migrants of their rights to choose their government.

The opposition candidate's failure to register on October 10th was the time when almost everybody in Tajikistan's cyber space lost their hope for any change. The opposition Social-Democratic Party boldly boycotted the election that they described as 'illegal' and 'fraudulent' by its leader Rahmatilla Zayirov effectively using social media and spreading his statements. He argued that the presidential election was illegal, because the acting president Emamali Rahman has been registered as a candidate illegally; and it was fraudulent, because the CEC would do everything possible to falsify the results of the election in favour of the acting president.¹²¹

Leaders of the opposition Islamic Rebirth Party also told journalists that they would not participate in the election, but 'would not boycott it' either. On the day of elections, its leader Muhieddin Kabiri was in Turkey, although he actively communicated with local media through social networks, such as Facebook. Lots of social media users changed their profile pictures into pictures with signs of boycotting the election. Dissident journalist and leader of opposition Vatandar Movement, Dadajan Atavollah, also called for boycotting the election by publishing his statements, remarks and mocking comments about Tajik president on Facebook pages.

¹²⁰ My blog in BBC Media Action website, *Tajikistan's election: a milestone for social media debate*, published on 5 November 2013, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/posts/Tajikistans-election-a-milestone-for-social-media-debate>

¹²¹ My blog in BBC Media Action website, *Tajikistan's election: a milestone for social media debate*

Chapter 4. Tajik Government's response to new media

On November 16, 2013, the re-elected president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahman, took the oath of commence for his fourth term in the office. Apparently, this date was carefully chosen to symbolise the 21st anniversary of his coming to power in a parliamentary session in the northern town of Khojand in November 1992. At the time, ousted president Rahman Nabiyeu was forced to submit his resignation letter to the Supreme Council, after Mr. Rahman became speaker of parliament of Tajikistan. In the same year civil war broke out in Tajikistan. It took five years for Mr. Rahman to reach a peace agreement with Islamist and democratic oppositions in June 1997. Hundreds of thousands of people died during the five year civil war. Many more were left homeless and took refuge abroad, mainly in Afghanistan, Russia and other Central Asian countries. This chapter looks at how government-media relationships eventually changed since the coming to power of President Rahman in the early 1990s and how Tajik officials reacted to the growing impact of newly emerging social media and communication technology.

Despite the peace agreement, clashes between government troops and militant groups opposing the peace process continued until 2001, when 9/11 events had changed the patterns of regional security in Central Asia. The period between 1992 and 2001 is considered to be the time of downfall and destruction of Tajik media, the time of agony and torment for journalists. Media and government relationships in this period were antagonistic, as the government did not tolerate independent media. Journalists turned into two hostile splinter groups of pro and anti-government activists. About 80 journalists and intellectuals were killed and many more were arrested, beaten, tortured or fled to other countries, if they had the chance. Some detained journalists were exchanged with government forces taken captive by opposition militant groups. The official media was considered to be the state propaganda mouthpiece. Journalists who supported opposition forces published their newspapers abroad, such as *Sada-ye Mujahid* (Voice of mujahidin) and *Paik-e Pirouzi* (Victory news)¹²² in Afghanistan and *Charagh-e Rouz* (Daylight) in Moscow. The only independent sources of information for many people from 1994 until the 2000s were the BBC and RFE/RL radios, although they were perceived to be foreign agents, a mentality inherited from the Soviet past which still exists.

Following the Peace Agreement with the Islamic opposition in 1997, Mr. Rahman, who had previously been unpopular and lacked a serious political background, was able to extend his power to all spheres of life. Initially backed by Moscow and Tashkent, he succeeded in strengthening his grip on power by manipulating and changing the Constitution twice in 1999 and 2003, which gave him full and uncontested power. Following the September 1999 Constitutional amendments, a new bicameral parliament was introduced in Tajikistan: Assembly of Representatives or lower chamber with 63 members elected for a five-year term, 22 by proportional representation and 41 in single-seat constituencies; and National Assembly or upper chamber with 33 members, 25 elected for five-year term by deputies of local councils and 8 appointed by the president himself. Apart from being head of the state, the Tajik president also heads the executive power. The post of prime minister in Tajikistan has become an 'honorary' position. The president's power was also extended to appoint heads of regions and districts, prosecutors, judges, heads of universities and the Academy of

¹²² *90 years of history: Tajik press now and then*, by Sultan Hamadov, published in Media Insight Central Asia # 24, May 2002, accessed at <http://www.cimera.org/files/came/en/24e/MICA24E-Khamadov.pdf>

Science, state TV and radio Committee etc. Presidential elections in 1999, 2006 and 2013 were rigged by irregularities and frauds, as reported by international observers. With no serious alternative opposition candidates and lack of genuine competition, the acting president was declared the winner in every election.

Some transformations took place in the economic life of Tajikistan over the past ten years, however, such as a reduction in poverty level to about 40 percent in 2012 compared to 72 percent in 2003. It is largely due to the country's return to stability and the flow of remittances from over one million labour migrants who mainly work in Russia. The increase in the remittances' flow was again due to the improvement in the banking system and the emergence of money transferring services as a result of the government's close cooperation with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Roads and tunnels were built through huge investments especially by the Chinese government. Russia and Iran also had their share of investment in building power stations. A bridge built by the US facilitated trade with Afghanistan, Iran and countries of South Asia. However a regular energy crisis in winter times, when the electricity supply to rural areas is severely restricted, widespread corruption and nepotism remain major problems.

Since 2001 the Tajik media also underwent remarkable transformations. More liberalization policies facilitated the growth of independent media, especially print, such as private newspapers. Although it can be attributed to the support of international, especially American organizations, such as the OSCE, the Soros Foundation, foreign embassies, which provided grants to local media owners to start their industry since early 2000s. One of their most successful projects was the emergence of ASIA-Plus media group. Established in 1995, it first printed bilingual news and an analytical bulletin in Russian and English, mainly targeted at staff of international organizations. Its first newspaper in Russian was published in January 2000 and its radio channel was launched in September 2002. It primarily appealed to a Russian-speaking urban population rather than the rural majority who spoke and read Persian (Tajik), although it subsequently launched its radio programs and webpage in the local language. It eventually emerged as a self-sustaining media group by largely benefitting from the publication of advertisements following the adoption of Law on Advertisements in 2003. According to the staff of ASIA-Plus media group, although it had all the necessary digital TV production equipment to launch a TV channel years ago, so far it has not succeeded in obtaining a license from the State Radio and TV Committee, largely due to the authorities' fear of competition.

With the birth of *Neerou-ye Sokhan* (Power of Word) in January 2003 and *Rouz-e now* (New Day) in August 2003 a new era of independent newspapers started. The first belonged to the Foundation for the Memory and Defence of Journalists led by Mokhtar Baqizadeh and the second to the independent journalist Rajab Mirza. Both started to critically examine and discuss political and social issues after hostilities ended, fear of harassment by warlords diminished and the country returned to stability. Both were suspended after one and two years of their publication under pressure from tax officials, however, they paved the way for the emergence of other independent newspapers, such as *Millat* (The Nation), *Farazh*, *Negaah* (A Glance), and more recently *Azadegan* (The Grandee).

'Information security concept'

Tajik authorities tolerated, to a greater extent, independent print media, such as newspapers, and to a lesser extent, radio channels, rather than independent TVs. Apart from TV being quite an expensive media, authorities also realised the fact that independent TVs might have more impact on public opinion, rather than independent newspapers with low circulations, and FM radios that only cover major cities such as Dushanbe and Khojand. On the other hand, the State TV and Radio committee has remarkably expanded its coverage and impact over the past decade, however with poor quality of its content, by receiving huge money from the state budget and opening new channels as well as installing new transmitters and receivers across the country, especially in rural and mountainous areas, where previously people could not watch state TVs due to the lack of signal.

In 2009, the state budget of Tajikistan (more than US\$10 million) was allocated to state radio and TV broadcasting, which was more than the allocated budget for the Ministry of Agriculture (around US\$7 million). In 2013, more than US\$16 million were allocated to state media, though state TV and radio committee is not particularly mentioned. Much of the equipment has been installed in border areas with Uzbekistan over the past ten years to protect what authorities call Tajikistan's 'information space' from foreign intervention. Just in 2011, more than 240 radio and TV transmitters were bought, most of which were installed in border districts with Uzbekistan.¹²³

All this followed the adoption in 2003 of the concept of 'information security', which is the authorities' efforts to limit the influence of foreign media, especially that of neighbouring countries. It seems that the notion of "information security" in Tajikistan is understood differently from the rest of the world, as it has become the job of State Radio and TV committee, rather than other institutions. It deals more with strengthening the state propaganda and controlling public opinion by creating a presumed border around the country (information space) and curbing potential cultural and ideological influence from outside, rather than the protection of private and personal data and information in public and private institutions, such as banks, companies, government agencies, etc from getting into wrong hands. For example, BBC radio FM broadcasts were suspended in Dushanbe and Khojand in 2006 after authorities adopted new regulation to restrict foreign FM broadcasts. According to this regulation, only local radio stations can buy FM licences. For foreign radio channels to broadcast on FM, they required intergovernmental agreements on broadcasting in territories of other countries.

The Tajik government's efforts to isolate the country from foreign media influence came at a time when new media and communication technology was emerging. With the arrival of online news media in Central Asia in the early 2000s, such as Centrasia.ru, Fergana.ru and Asia-Plus (in Russian), and BBC Persian and RFE/RL websites providing news in local language, many people started to comment on reports and articles (published mainly in Russian). It was in this period that the former Tajik presidential advisor-turned-opposition politician Rahmatilla Zayirov, who currently is the leader of the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan, questioned the legitimacy of President Rahman's rule after the referendum of 2003 for the first time.

¹²³ RFE/RL's interactive question and answer with the head of Tajikistan's State TV and Radio Committee, Asadullah Rahmanov, on 02.06.2012, accessed at <http://www.ozodi.org/content/interview/24212732.html>

Lawsuits threatening media

There was a key difference between the first and the second decade of Tajikistan's independence. More than 75 journalists were killed during the first decade of independence, but there were no such cases during the second decade. If previously officials would target journalists by threatening and violence, in the second decade their approach was in a more civilized manner. Now they would file lawsuits against independent journalists and media outlets. Over the past ten years there have been many cases of government officials filing lawsuits against independent newspapers and journalists.

Human Rights Watch wrote in its 2012 report: "In January (2011) then-chief of the Sogd Regional Department of Fighting Organized Crime (UBOP) filed a lawsuit against the weekly *Asia-Plus* for 1 million samanis (US\$210,000) in moral damages, after a December 2010 article described alleged torture and ill-treatment by UBOP officers in the Sogd region. In April, authorities confiscated equipment from *Paykan* newspaper in connection with a 2010 libel suit. In May, after a Dushanbe court granted the Ministry of Justice's petition to liquidate *Paykan*'s founding organization for alleged violations, printing houses refused to print the paper, forcing it to close."¹²⁴

Mahmadyusef Ismailov, local correspondent of independent newspapers *Nur-e Zendagi* and *Esteqlal* was detained and held in custody for more than a year from 23 November 2010 until December 2011. "Although this journalist has been in provisional detention for more than 10 months, - wrote Reporters Without Borders in a statement, - the investigators have still been unable to produce any convincing evidence for the charges against him."¹²⁵

According to Reporters Without Borders, Ismailov was charged with defamation (under article 135 of the criminal code), insult (article 136), inciting hatred (article 189.2) and embezzlement (article 250). The first three charges were confirmed at a hearing on the basis of an "expert linguistic analysis" of newspaper stories by Ismailov in which he criticized the prosecutor, and other local officials and representatives.¹²⁶ After a year of trial, Ismailov was released at the end of 2011, but he was detained again recently on the eve of 2013 presidential election and was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

BBC Uzbek Service reporter, Urunbay Usmanov, was another journalist who was detained in the summer of 2011. He was detained on charges of links with the outlawed Hezb-e Tahrir Islamist group. He was released after one month, following protests from local and international media and journalist organizations. During his detention, I, personally, went to the northern city of Khojand, met and talked to him with two other BBC representatives in the presence of security officials. Following his release, Usmanov said he was tortured while in detention.¹²⁷

In January 2012, dissident journalist and critic of President Rahman, Dadajan Atavollah, was stabbed twice in the stomach by an unidentified attacker in a restaurant in central Moscow, who underwent emergency surgery in hospital. Over the past ten years he had been detained several times by Russian police at the request of Tajik authorities, but was

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2012: Tajikistan, accessible at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-tajikistan>

¹²⁵ Reporters Without Borders, Prosecutor requests 14 years for reporter who criticized local officials, published on 30 September 2011, accessed at http://en.rs.f.org/tajikistan-prosecutor-requests-14-years-for-30-09-2011_41084.html

¹²⁶ The same

¹²⁷ Reporters Without Borders, BBC correspondent tells court he was tortured while detained. Published on 23 August 2011, accessed at http://en.rs.f.org/tadjikistan-bbc-correspondent-tells-court-he-23-08-2011_40553.html

released under pressure from the international community, as he had a German travel passport as an asylum seeker.¹²⁸

Self-censorship

Another key feature of Tajik media in the second decade of independence was widespread self-censorship. Tragic memories of the killing of journalists during the Civil War were still alive and most Tajik journalists would still avoid sharp criticism of high ranking officials. Criticism of President Rahman and Mahmadsayid Ubaydullayev, mayor of Dushanbe and speaker of the upper house of the parliament, second after Rahman in the hierarchy of power, was almost a taboo. Even most independent newspapers still avoid directly criticizing these two powerful men; instead one can read stories praising them and criticizing officials of lower ranks for not properly completing their tasks instructed by the president or the mayor.

According to the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, between 2005 and 2009 a number of law and acts regulating media were adopted that had a 'positive but in some cases, negative' impact in the sphere of access to information in the country. One of these regulations was the Tajik president's instruction of March 4, 2005 obliging state officials to organise quarterly press conference for journalists to ensure more transparency. According to the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, following the President's instruction, for the first time journalists had a chance to talk directly to high ranking officials, who previously, were not willing to meet them. As a result, violations regarding lack of access to information decreased significantly.¹²⁹

Nevertheless, self-censorship was widespread because defamation and libel was considered to be a crime in Tajikistan until recently. After a long struggle by media NGOs, the authorities finally decriminalized libel and defamation in May 2012, although regulations imposing criminal punishment for insulting the president still exist.¹³⁰

Over the past decade Tajik authorities have blocked access to news websites and social networks several times. Among the blocked websites in July 2012 were popular websites such as *Asia-Plus*, *Ferghana News*, *Lenta* and the *BBC*, which followed the government operation in eastern Badakhshan province. The state communications chief declared Facebook a "hotbed of slander" and ordered it to be blocked nationwide. YouTube also was blocked.¹³¹

'Arab Spring' impact

It has been a time of great transformations in the former Soviet republics. In 2004, the orange and rose revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia respectively brought about the downfall of autocratic rulers. A year on, in April 2005, Kyrgyzstan's tulip revolution saw the overthrow of President Askar Akayev. Many hoped for the transfer of such revolutions to

¹²⁸ Reporters Without Borders, Tajik opposition journalist stabbed in Moscow, published on 13 January 2012, accessed at <http://en.rsf.org/russia-tajik-opposition-journalist-13-01-2012,41676.html>

¹²⁹ National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, Access to Information Report 2005-2009, accessed at <http://nansmit.tj/13958/>

¹³⁰ BBC Persian (Tajik) page, Гайриҷиноӣ шудани тавҳину таҳқир: "Тоza оғози қор асr" (Defamation and libel decriminalized: not yet enough), published in 31 May 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/institutional/2012/05/120531_sq_media_press.shtml

¹³¹ Reporters Without Borders, Massive Internet Censorship could add Tajikistan to "Countries Under Surveillance", published on 2 August 2012, access at <http://en.rsf.org/tadjikistan-access-to-one-of-tajikistan-s-main-25-07-2012,43109.html>

other central Asian countries. When similar protests started in neighbouring Uzbekistan in May 2005 however, government troops fired at protesters in the town of Andijan, killing several hundred civilians. It was a turning point in regional politics. The formerly pro-Western president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, turned to Moscow. This worked in favour of Mr Rahman who now developed better diplomatic relations with Western countries. The people's fear of a crackdown by the government after the Andijan massacre, in combination with Mr Rahman's more consolidated position and state media propaganda against any kind of protests, ruled out the possibility of change in Tajikistan.

The years between 2004 and 2007 were the time of President Rahman's greatest popularity. His popularity started to gradually diminish after the 2007 cold winter and the nationwide energy crisis, during which several new born children and some patients were said to have died in hospitals and all infrastructure was paralysed. The impact of the 2007/2008 global economic crisis, a polio outbreak in Tajikistan in 2010, the government's failure to deliver on his promise of building the Raghun power station, fighting with Islamist militant in the eastern Rasht valley in 2009 and 2010, a government operation in the eastern region of Badakhshan in 2012, arresting and persecution of some opposition activists on the eve of 2013 presidential election contributed to growing public discontent.

On the other hand, the development of new communication technologies over the past decade has brought about profound changes in public and political life in Tajikistan. In recent years, especially since the time of 'Arab Spring' revolutions, social networks such as Facebook and Odnoklasniki have become not just platforms for the exchange of ideas and opinions, but a battlefield between the advocates and opponents of change in Tajik politics.

Since the emergence of internet the government's response to the impact of new media in Tajikistan was ambiguous. On the one hand, the Tajik government adopted laws and legislations over the past ten years to develop e-governance; some projects have been implemented, for example in the banking sector, but in other spheres, especially education and health, the positive potential of new technology was not used appropriately. According to Tajikistan's Electronic Readiness Research conducted in 2012 and released in May 2013, at the beginning of 2013 more than 222 documents, such as laws, codes, decrees of the President, resolutions of the Government, concept documents, and programs, existed in Tajikistan which contained the word 'Internet'.¹³²

This may indicate the positive steps by the government of Tajikistan to expand the network access in various fields, such as health, education, economy, and culture. As a result, lots of government institutions, such as ministries and agencies, courts, universities and schools, banks and health centres opened their websites where they can provide information and also interact with citizens. The Tajik president's website was very active in both providing information on the daily activities of the president and receiving complaints and appeals by the citizens. Banks effectively used new communication technologies to provide their services, such as getting salaries and pensions through electronic cards, transfer of money, paying electricity and water bills, top-up of mobiles, etc. However, in the political sphere, when it comes to public debates and discussions in social media or news sites, the government's reaction and attitude towards new media was controversial.

¹³² My blog in BBC Media Action website, Social media in Tajikistan: a battlefield, published on 18 June 2013, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmiaaction/posts/Social-media-in-Tajikistan-a-battlefield->

Mobiles 'harmful'

One of the vivid instances of government reaction to new technology was President Rahman's several statements about the growing usage of mobiles in Tajikistan. In his previous speeches, he often warned people about the dangers of mobiles, and encouraged them to spend less time on them. He even quoted doctors that mobiles were harmful for health. However, international media report that scientists have confirmed that there is no link between mobile phones and alleged health problems, such as cancer, in human beings.¹³³

On one occasion, he told people to spend less time on mobiles and instead pay their electricity bills. After one of his warnings about this in 2010, state TV reduced the number of mobile advertisements; mobile ad posters were also reduced in cities and towns. The government also imposed a 3 percent VAT on mobiles and Internet in 2011 and 2012, adding to the cost of their usage.¹³⁴

Last summer, the President's reaction to his son's wedding video broadcast and criticized by dissident journalist Dadajan Atavollah on K+ regional TV was furious. As one government official told me, people at "all levels of the government are discussing the video and its consequences". The website of TV channel K+ TV and YouTube were blocked for two weeks in May and although it cannot be independently verified, the government has reportedly detained a number of people for leaking the video, including state TV journalists.

On the one hand, President Rahman has publicly recognized the potential of new technology. According to his own spokesperson, he marked National Youth Day in Tajikistan on 23 May, 2013 by handing out iPads to a crowd of more than 2,000 young people and attracted criticism from the opposition who claimed that he was trying to buy young people's online favour. His largesse also led to an ironic new online catchphrase – "You smell [of] iPad" – used by critics of the government when attacked by pro-government voices.¹³⁵

But on the other hand, Rahman repeatedly spoke out against the widespread use of mobile phones. In the same speech on National Youth Day, he repeated his opinion that mobiles damage health, citing "scholars in Ireland" whom, he says, "have proved that mobile use causes fatigue, disorientation, sleep disorders and low immunity" and increases the risk of brain tumors.¹³⁶

Who's the owner of Facebook?

During the government troop's operation in Kharogh in July 2012, all communication with the region was cut; later the Tajik Communication Service blocked access to Facebook, YouTube and other social media and news websites several times.

One of the most peculiar cases was when the head of the Tajik Communication Service was interviewed after Facebook had been blocked in Tajikistan in November 2012 and was

¹³³ BBC News Health, *Mobile phones: 'Still no evidence of harm to health'*, published on 26 April, 2012, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-17843953>

¹³⁴ US Department of State, Tajikistan - 2013 Investment Climate Statement, accessed at <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/tajikistan/231771/PDFs/2013-tajikistan-investment-climate-statement-final.pdf>

¹³⁵ My blog in BBC Media Action website, *Social media in Tajikistan: a battlefield*, published on 18 June 2013, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/posts/Social-media-in-Tajikistan-a-battlefield->

¹³⁶ My blog in BBC Media Action website, *Social media in Tajikistan: a battlefield*,

asked if the Communication Service blocked Facebook. He replied journalists: “Who is the owner of Facebook? Does this site have any owner or not? Does he pay taxes? I am ready to meet him and discuss problems of this site if he wishes so!”¹³⁷

This became a matter of funny discussions on Facebook for a long time. Days later, somebody called Mr Zuhurov posed as Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. Asked what the problem with Facebook in Tajikistan was, Mr Zuhurov complained about how social media was a place of insults, slander and defamation of government officials.

The next day, he announced to journalists that he finally was able to talk to Mark Zuckerberg. The man who posed as Zuckerberg, however, published the conversation’s audio on many social networks and announced that they had been able to trick the head of the Communication Service.¹³⁸

Then in a press statement, the authorities appealed to users of Facebook to avoid ‘inappropriate’ comments and debates about famous politicians:

*“Internet has become a great school where you can access all contemporary knowledge - you can teach others and use it in your daily life. Not just journalists, but all strata of society now use the internet - ranging from schoolchildren to writers, politicians, analysts and even farmers. The internet is in fact a free tribune. The Communication Service strives to have people use this freedom appropriately and get information about the politics in the world; the internet should not cause internal and external conflicts.”*¹³⁹

In this statement, the officials mentioned that some people use internet and social media as a ‘tribune of slander and name-calling’, which should be condemned. Instead they promised that people will observe more and more developments of new science and technology in Tajikistan.

*“Using internet for slander and name-calling instead of increasing one’s knowledge however runs counter to our moral traditions. Therefore, the Communication Service of Tajikistan appeals to all journalists and internet users to use this great tribune in favour of our nation and state. They should use it appropriately and obey moral norms. If we use it appropriately, observe ethical norms, use it for the benefit of our country and people, all debates (he means decisions) about the restriction of access to websites will be suspended.”*¹⁴⁰

The Mayor’s ‘tea parties’

Perhaps, one of the best examples of Tajik authorities’ response to social media came from the speaker of the upper house of the Tajik parliament and mayor of Dushanbe, Mahmadsaid. He has organised several meetings with Facebook users in Tajikistan in the past few years. His first meeting with more than 200 Facebook users took place on 23 August, 2012, exactly one month after the government’s failed military operation in

¹³⁷ Movement.org, *Cellphones and AntiProxies, Fighting Tools in Tajikistan*, by Solmaz Sharif, published on May 31, 2013, accessed at <http://www.movements.org/blog/entry/cellphones-and-antiproxies-fighting-tools-in-tajikistan/>

¹³⁸ BBC Persian (tajik) page, Бек Зухуров: Фейсбук соҳиб дорад ё не? By Anora Sarkorova, published on 28 November 2012, accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2012/11/121128_tajikistan_facebook_ban.shtml

¹³⁹ Statement by the Communication Service of Tajikistan, published in 2012, accessed at <http://khovar.tj/society/26235-muro1207iatnomai-hadamoti-alo1179ai-nazdi-1202uku-mati-1206um1203urii-to1207ikiston.html>

¹⁴⁰ Statement by the Communication Service of Tajikistan, published in 2012, above

Kharogh, when all communications with Badakhshan region were cut.¹⁴¹

In his first 'open' meeting with Facebook users in Tajikistan, he said demonstratively: *"I opened my own page in Facebook but it created a problem for me consciously. What is my objective? My objective is that you should have a direct relationship with me. For instance, you should tell me openly that one or another subject of mine, Ahmadov or another person, does not have a conscience, he is irresponsible. I am ready to dismiss him immediately."*¹⁴²

During his meetings with Facebook users, he repeatedly asked them to propose new ideas on how to improve the services in the capital city, transport system, water supply etc. Although there are some improvements in the work of the city administration staff, one still cannot say that his meeting with Facebook users brought about a great deal of change. But this idea that he meets Facebook users and understands their points of view is positive. After his meeting many of participants praised Ubaydullayev and said that it would have been better if other officials could take similar appropriate actions instead of restricting access to new media.¹⁴³

According to a local journalist, Marat Mamadshah, some representatives of the government read posts and commentaries on Facebook, but their number is limited, and so it is unlikely that social media influences them to change their decisions:

"Facebook is a platform for variety of people to have an opportunity to express their opinions about various problems openly and without fear, including about issues that are considered to be taboo. The level of freedom of expression is quite high, but the level of responsibility is very low. We have to understand this."

*I don't think social media debates bring any significant change in near future, however, through the social networks, intellectuals may determine their position regarding one or another issue. For instance, there were productive discussions about the issue of avoiding violence."*¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, when I interviewed Marat in summer 2013, he believed that discussions in social media had already played a certain role in the pre-election process. The role of social media would eventually grow with the passing of time, he said. Indeed, the November presidential election has at least become a milestone for social media debates, even if it did not bring serious changes to Tajikistan's politics.

¹⁴¹ RFE/RL, Гуфтугӯи бе миёнрави М.Убайдуллоев бо фејсбукино (Ubaydullayev's talk to Facebook users without mediators), published on 23 August 2012, accessed at <http://www.ozodi.org/content/article/24685392.html>

¹⁴² RFE/RL, Ubaydullayev's talk to Facebook users without mediators, published on 23 August 2012

¹⁴³ Global Voices, Tajikistan's Capital Mayor Meets with Facebook Users, published on 27 August 2012, accessed at <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/08/27/tajikistans-capital-mayor-meets-with-facebook-users/>

¹⁴⁴ My personal interview with Marat Mamadshayev, conducted on July 2013

Conclusions

Although it did not bring about a major change in political power, the November 6 presidential election in Tajikistan was a milestone in the history of social media and politics in the country. Ahead of this election, there were sufficient grounds to believe that President Rahman's government would not survive the public pressure facilitated by the new media and communication technology. Enduring problems, such as widespread poverty and corruption, the president's grip on power, the persecution of the opposition, the pressure on religious figures, growing discontent within the population, and the president's turning the country into a family industry, all became subjects of social media discussions.

On the eve of the election, Tajikistan's situation, at least on cyberspace, in some ways resembled that of Egypt in 2010 when President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown: widespread use of communication tools such as mobile phones and computers, growing discussion in social media of persistent social and political issues such as corruption and fraud, authoritarianism and human rights violations, people's growing demand for change, the emergence of a more organized and powerful opposition on the ground, as well as growing trust in and transformation of the mainstream media. Many expected that the government's failure to fulfil its promises may potentially bring about social unrest, which in turn would have a serious impact on politics and governance. Spurred on by social media criticism and the condemnation of every step taken by the government, such as the controversial operation in the eastern Badakhshan region in July 2012 that left about 50 dead and many more injured, opposition leaders prepared a plan of post-Rahman reform in Tajikistan.

Realities on the ground however, appeared to be different from what was going on in cyberspace. No single protest occurred even when serious irregularities were observed and brought to public attention by the media and condemned by the opposition from the day the election campaign started until the date of voting; these included the denial of more than one million labour migrants their right to collect signatures and propose their candidates. Both social media discussions and opposition efforts seemed to be ineffective in bringing about any change in the public and political life of the country. Instead, the government's careful surveillance of social media debates, civil society and opposition activities, and their efficient coordination of the way events unfolded, together with the enormous financial and administrative resources and state media propaganda they could deploy against the opposition, turned out to be more productive in managing public opinion to its own benefit. What is it that caused this 'failure'? Answering this question will provide answers to my research questions.

According to social media researcher Clay Shirky, there are two views regarding the use of social media and new communication tools and their impact in bringing about change in public and political life. One is the 'instrumental' view that focuses on public access to media and sources of information, including social networks, such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter etc., rather than private social uses of digital media.

“The instrumental view is politically appealing, action-oriented, and almost certainly wrong. It overestimates the value of broadcast media while underestimating the value of media that allow citizens to communicate privately among themselves. It overestimates the value of access to information, particularly information hosted in the West, while underestimating the value of

tools for local coordination. And it overestimates the importance of computers while underestimating the importance of simpler tools, such as cell phones."¹⁴⁵

The second view, Shirky argues, is an 'environmental' view that thinks about social media as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere. According to this conception, positive changes follow, rather than precede, the development of a strong public sphere and 'densely connected' civil society:

*"Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they get echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues. It is in this second, social step that political opinions are formed. This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference."*¹⁴⁶

Based on these theories, a very weak civil society can be blamed for the lack of transformation in Tajikistan. The candidate for the opposition Islamic Rebirth Party candidate Aynehal Babanazarova is a case in point. With little involvement in politics over the past two decades, but with a long-time collaboration with international organizations, such as the OSCE and the Soros Foundation, and leading a human rights NGO of her own, called "Perspectiva+", she in many ways represents Tajikistan's relatively weak and silent civil society. She has been a university lecturer since 1976 and in 1989 became dean of the law faculty (department) at the National University of Tajikistan. In 1990 she joined the Democratic Party of Tajikistan. She was under house arrest for a month in 1994 and was dismissed from her position at the university and later was amnestied by President Rahman.

Babanazarova has never been very active in politics since the civil war broke out and Rahman came to power. She avoided politics or political activism and led her own human rights NGO quietly. When the opposition Islamic Rebirth Party proposed her candidacy, many believed that the opposition could enjoy the support of civil society in its efforts to bring about democratic reforms, a condition similar to that of neighbouring Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, when opposition and civil society groups led by Roza Otunbayeva ousted President Kurmanbek Baqiyev. However, the failure of Babanazarova's team to get enough signatures to register her candidacy was evidence of the indifference of Tajik civil society groups and NGOs, which are often criticized for being grant-hungry. Critics of the NGOs in Tajikistan, which sprang up during the civil war, say they have been spoiled by the flow of foreign aid to a war-struck country, and are not bold enough to withstand political pressure. Instead, they limit their projects to superficial awareness campaigns that do not reach beyond the mainly educated inhabitants of urban centres. Founders of NGOs usually belong to a cluster from the urban elite who are often accused of working together and sharing grants through donor contacts. In other words, Tajik civil society lacks genuine leaders and devoted social activists that could appeal to the general public. People trust more in religious leaders, rather than intellectuals and activists. The scholar of Central Asian Studies at University of Kashmir, Firdoos Dar, says Tajik NGOs are discouraged from undertaking political activity:

The government maintains strict control over any NGO suspected of having a

¹⁴⁵ Essay by Clay Shirky, *The political Power of Social Media, Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change*, published by the US Council on Foreign Affairs on January/February 2011, accessed at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~beki/cs4001/Shirky.pdf>

¹⁴⁶ Clay Shirky, *ibid.*

*political agenda, despite the constitutional guarantee of freedom of association. Such an NGO must obtain a permit to hold public demonstrations or rallies, for example. Even when the permit is granted, authorities have in some cases carried out reprisals against organizers. In particular, the government tends to view as political opponents those NGOs devoted to human rights, especially the ones that have been vocal in criticizing the government's record.*¹⁴⁷

In contrast to civil society, the Tajik government has been successful in strengthening its position of power over the past two decades, largely due to the lack of civil society's timely reaction to its decisions, such as the Constitutional amendments in 1999 and 2003 that weakened democratic institutions. So, the ideal shift in balance of power between the state and civil society that led to the largely peaceful collapse of communism, as noted by Shirky, has not been a case in Tajikistan. According to him, communication tools did not cause governments to collapse during the Cold War, but rather they helped people take power from the state when it was weak.¹⁴⁸ In Tajikistan, once quite active NGOs, especially during the civil war and peace-building process, have become weaker over the past ten years, largely due to the lack of local funding and their reliance on foreign support, which if stopped would disrupt the NGOs' activities.¹⁴⁹

Another factor was that the lack of proper coordination and a rift between the opposition leaders hindered their efforts to stand firm against a strong government. Of course, the time for the presidential election campaign was limited - it was hard for opposition politicians to promote their programmes and win popularity amongst the population. The government had all the administrative resources, the facility and manpower to deploy at poll centres. Moreover, there was little international pressure on the government, partly because Tajikistan has little influence in regional and global politics, even if a limited number of foreign election observers monitored the election. Instead, a month before the election, the government gained Russian support after the Tajik parliament approved an agreement on Russian military bases to remain on Tajik soil until 2030.

So even before the elections it was already clear that the acting president would win. With a scarcely credible 90.2 per cent turnout and 84.25 per cent of votes, the acting president Emamali Rahman was declared winner once again by the Central Election Commission (CEC). Five other candidates from communist, democrat, socialist, agriculture and economic reform parties were unable to win even five per cent of votes. A report in the Islamic Rebirth Party website Nahzat.tj said that none of Rahman's five competitors were able to secure 210,000 votes (or five per cent of all electorate) equal to the number of signatures they collected for their candidacy approval, and this proved that they had falsified signatures.¹⁵⁰ According to Tajik law, presidential candidates had to collect the signatures of 5 per cent of voters in their favour to be registered. In the election, the CEC calculated that five per cent of voters would be 210,000, although it was unclear how they deducted this figure from the uncertain total number of voters. In Tajikistan's circumstances it is completely impossible to work out the total number of voters, as hundreds of thousands of

¹⁴⁷ Firdoos Dar, The Role of NGOs in Independent Tajikistan, The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, Volume 15, Issue 1, March 2013, accessed at http://www.icnl.org/research/journal/vol15iss1/art_3.htm#_ftn1

¹⁴⁸ Clay Shirky, *ibid*.

¹⁴⁹ Firdoos Dar, *ibid*

¹⁵⁰ A report entitled 'Коршиносон натиҷаи интихоботро зери суол бурданд' (Experts doubt election results), published in Islamic Rebirth Party's website, Nahzat.tj, on 11 November 2013, accessed at <http://www.nahzat.tj/akhbor/item/10595-korwinoson-natijai-ontixobotro-noderest-gyftand>

labour migrants live abroad. Nevertheless, the CEC declared at the beginning of the election campaign on 30 August 2013 that there were four million and 22 thousand voters in Tajikistan, including labour migrants abroad. But asked if they had any figure for labour migrants, they admitted that “no institution was able to give us the total figure for labour migrants.”¹⁵¹

However, it should be noted that political change may take place after the elections, and the government still faces a powerful opposition in the Islamic Rebirth Party. It is widely believed that the party had not been granted the real representation it had deserved in the parliamentary election of February 2010 largely due to electoral fraud. Its failure to register its candidate in the 2013 presidential election, mainly due to the authorities’ pressure and intimidation and over a million labour migrants not being allowed to collect signatures, has clearly frustrated thousands of opposition supporters. It may not be able to organise a ‘revolution’ similar to the ‘Arab spring’ scenario. It may however, be able to take advantage of any opening in the political arena that may open up in the future.

Potential unrest may come from marginalised groups in Tajikistan who have nothing to lose in taking to the streets: those who are fed up with corruption, torture and harassment by the police and security forces; those who have to give bribes to officials; those who pay doctors and medical workers for ‘free’ medical attention; those with numerous children who have to pay every teacher, every director for their children’s ‘free’ education; those whose relatives have been living in Russia for years and rarely ever come back to visit them; those who pick cotton and get no benefit from it; those who pay the toll companies every time they go through the only road linking the south and north of the country; and those who have lost their property because their businesses have been seized by the ruling elite.

One of the reasons why people are more engaged in social media is their lack of access to free, independent media, and especially TV stations. TV is a major source of information for Tajiks, but all TV stations in Tajikistan are propaganda tools in the hands of the government, although their budget comes from tax-payers. Tajik state TV channels do not give space to opposition politicians, or to a wide variety of groups and strata in Tajik society, to discuss social and political issues in the country. This leads people either to buy satellite dishes to watch foreign TV channels or engage in strident debates in the social media.

Tajik independent newspapers and periodicals do not reach all corners of the country and the majority of the population are deprived of information. Even the state-owned newspapers do not reach rural areas. The majority of people are ignorant of political developments in the country. In these circumstances, social media become the major source of information for many people who do not trust the official media. Contrary to the traditional and state-controlled media, social media provide different opportunities for people, the main one being interaction. In social networks people are not just consumers of information, they also contribute to its production. Citizen journalism has become one of the main sources of information for journalists today. Journalists and mainstream media sometimes get first-hand information from social networks, then check and recheck it for authentication. Therefore it is also important for the mainstream media to realise the role of social media and make use of it - both in getting first-hand information and in reaching out to millions of people.

¹⁵¹ BBC report, *ibid*

One of the main differences between mainstream and citizen journalism is the quality of information. In social media, one can find any sort of information, some of it correct, some of it wrong. But reporters of the mainstream media have the ability to check information received from social media, authenticate it and produce reporting of better quality. Thus, the exchange of information and knowledge and skills is useful in filling the gaps in both types of media: mainstream media get raw information from social media, reproduce it and feed it back. As a result, shortages in both types of media are corrected and gaps are filled.

Mobiles, together with other tools such as social networks, may sometimes cause problems for authorities if they do not deal with them appropriately and reasonably. Instead of imposing restrictions, the government could try to better understand the public opinion expressed in social media, and take appropriate decisions to solve people's problems. When all ways of voicing discontent are closed, people opt for more radical options.

For example, many of my interviewees said that when mobile videos emerged on YouTube or Facebook about various irregularities, such as torture in Tajik prisons, the response of the government was insufficient. No independent commission was formed to investigate the allegations of torture in prisons, although it is the case that legislature was changed and torture is now considered to be a crime, and such cases can be dealt with more appropriately.

To sum up my conclusions, I would point to Clay Shirky's statement that 'the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere – change measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months'. In his words, as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, and as people gain greater access to information, there will be more opportunities to engage in public speech and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.¹⁵²

Taking this into account, although the November 6 presidential election did not bring about serious changes in Tajikistan, it was a milestone for social media discussions that may help to bring about social and political transformations in the country. Growing usage of communication devices, such as mobiles and iPads, which provide more opportunity for interaction and conversation, will facilitate the flow and exchange of information as well as coordinated action. It is through social media that civil society groups, politicians, social activists and journalists can better engage in conversation with the public to form public opinion, coordinate, guide and lead actions aimed at desired reforms and transformations in all spheres of life, from education to health, literature to culture, from society to government etc.

My case studies already demonstrated the impact of mobile phones and social networks, such as Facebook, in changing lives. New media technology poses a serious challenge for the government, opposition, civil society as well as the traditional media. The Tajik government and opposition groups became active in using social media to promote their ideas and programs in the run-up to the presidential election. Journalists and traditional media now successfully use social media to spread their information. However, the potential of mobiles, as the most widespread tools of communication in the country, has not yet been fully recognised and used effectively, especially by the mainstream media, to fill the information gap in rural areas, where there is no access to internet and social networks.

¹⁵² Clay Shirky, *ibid.*

Although Tajikistan's internet penetration rate is not as high as that of some other developing countries, the growing expansion of the internet and social media and other communication tools is inevitable. In other words, the hope of preventing the impact of the new (social) media in many countries and societies is a futile one. Tajikistan is no exception. The government's failure to fulfil its promises may potentially bring about social unrest, which in turn may have serious consequences in politics and governance. The authorities' use of war rhetoric to prevent social unrest might be a good way to maintain stability in the short term. In the long term however, it may result in horrible consequences for the ruling elite.

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