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Elections in the Republic of Tajikistan

2020 Parliamentary Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Eurasia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

2011 Crystal Drive | Floor 10 | Arlington, VA 22202 | www.IFES.org

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Disclosure:
These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Tajik elections authorities as of February 26, 2020, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

When is Election Day?

Parliamentary (lower house) and local council elections in Tajikistan will be held on March 1, 2020. A presidential election will also be held in 2020; though the date has not been officially announced, this election is expected to take place in November. Tajikistan's upper house, which is indirectly elected, will have its vote on March 27, 2020.

What is at stake in these elections?

Sixty-three seats in the *Majlisi Namoyandagon*, the lower house of the bicameral Parliament (*Majlisi Oli*), will be contested via a mixed system. In addition, members of local legislatures (*Majlises*) of the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region, Khatlon, Soghd, the Regions of Republican Subordination, the city of Dushanbe and smaller cities and districts will be elected on March 1.

These will be the first national elections held since the 2019 amendments to the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Tajikistan, "On Elections to the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan," and the 2016 constitutional referendum, which resulted in changes to the minimum age of candidate registration, the composition of the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums – reducing its permanent members from 15 to seven – safeguards against foreign influence in elections and restrictions on the rights of domestic and international election observers.

The current Parliament is dominated by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). PDP-friendly appointees rule the 33-seat *Majlisi Milli* (upper house), and the PDP holds a decisive advantage in the *Majlisi Namoyandagon* with 51 of the 63 mandates. Of the 12 non-PDP deputies in the lower house, none can be regarded as a genuine alternative. Since the banning of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) by the government in 2015, the *Namoyandagon* has lacked opposition voices. Once locked in a power-sharing arrangement with President Emomali Rahmon's PDP as a result of the 1998 Peace Accords that ended the Tajik Civil War (1992-97), the IRP has seen its status slowly eroded by an emboldened ruling party, until it was outright de-registered through a new regulation that prohibits the existence of political parties based on religious affiliation. The party presently exists in exile, with Chairman Mohiuddin Kabiri and other IRP leaders scattered across the Middle East and Europe.¹

What is the campaign timeline?

The campaign starts after the close of candidate registration and ends 24 hours before Election Day. Candidates and political parties may campaign through February 28. The day before the election, February 29, is observed as a "quiet day," with all campaign activities officially prohibited.

What is the electoral system and what is the election management system?

Tajikistan features a mixed system of elections to the lower house of Parliament, combining proportional representation with a single-mandate majoritarian component. Of the 63 members of the

¹ <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistans-exiled-opposition-adrift-as-strongman-rule-hardens-at-home>

Majlisi Namoyandagon, 41 are elected from single-mandate districts. The other 22 seats are determined by a closed-list proportional representation (“party list”) system, which has a 5 percent minimum barrier. At least 50 percent of all voters must participate for the election to be considered valid. If this is not achieved, the election will be run again. For the single-mandate contests, in the first round of voting a candidate must receive 50 percent plus one of votes to prevail outright. Should no candidate achieve this, the two candidates with the highest percentage of votes from the first round will compete in a second round of voting.

In the 33-member *Majlisi Mill* (upper chamber), 25 deputies are elected for a five-year term by deputies of local *majlises* and eight are appointed directly by the president.

Elections in Tajikistan are managed by the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums (CCER), which oversees 41 District Election Commissions – one for each majoritarian district – and approximately 3,380 Precinct Election Commissions. The CCER consists of seven permanent members – down from 15 as per changes made to the CCER law in 2019 – who should be nonpartisan, professional persons. CCER members were previously nominated by political parties.

The CCER has a wide mandate to set electoral boundaries, register candidates and approve party lists, appoint lower-level election management bodies, conduct voter education, adjudicate electoral disputes and regulate the work of domestic and international election observers.

Who is eligible to run as a candidate?

Citizens at least 30 years old may run as candidates in the elections, provided they have a higher education, have lived in Tajikistan for at least the past five years, can pass a Tajik language examination and cannot claim dual citizenship. Candidates with dual citizenship were previously eligible to run and the minimum age was increased from 25 years via a national referendum in 2016.

Political parties can submit candidate lists once the elections are announced. Candidates running for majoritarian mandates may be nominated 60 days prior to the March 1 election. The nomination period ends 45 days before Election Day.

Political parties may provide a list of no more than 28 candidates running for the 22 national mandates and only one candidate in each single-mandate district. Independent candidates are only eligible to run in single-mandate districts. Party list and majoritarian candidates must provide electoral deposits of 5,800 somoni (just under USD \$600) to register.

Unlike candidates nominated by political parties, independent candidates must collect at least 500 additional signatures of voters in their districts. Further, each voter may only support one candidate and cannot provide his or her signature to support registration of multiple candidates. The registration requirements for independent candidates are arduous, and the criteria by which decisions are ultimately made are opaque and not clearly defined in the legislation.

The major political parties competing in these elections are the People’s Democratic Party (ruling party), Communist Party, Socialist Party, Agrarian Party, Social-Democratic Party, Party of Economic Reforms

and Democratic Party. As of January 31, political parties had nominated 74 candidates for the 22 national mandates and 89 candidates for the 41 single-mandate districts.²

Who is eligible to vote, and how many registered voters are there?

Voters who are 18 years of age or older on Election Day may cast ballots for the *Majlisi Namoyandagon* elections, provided they are not currently incarcerated or declared “incapacitated” by a court. According to the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums, there are 4,793,282 eligible voters for this election. This figure includes an unknown number of labor migrants residing abroad, who at any point in time could constitute up to one-fourth of the voting population. Given that much of the labor migration is seasonal, a greater number of migrants may be in the country during the winter months, which could theoretically augur a higher voter turnout.

Tajikistan has a passive system of voter registration, with lists compiled and maintained at the local level. There is not a central voter database. Voter registration is confirmed via a combination of lists provided by local Precinct Election Commissions combined with a door-to-door check. Voter lists are displayed for public review for 15 days ahead of the election.

Voters who will not be in their home districts on Election Day may vote early, up to two weeks in advance of the election, at their respective District Election Commissions. Mobile ballot boxes will also be used for voters with disabilities or who are sick, with special polling stations set up in hospitals, universities and at military bases.

Voters will cast ballots at approximately 3,380 polling stations across Tajikistan and at 40 out-of-country polling stations.

What is the level of women’s representation?

Women comprise 20 percent of the current *Majlisi Namoyandagon*, occupying 13 of 63 seats, and 18 percent of the *Majlisi Milli*, or six of 33 seats. There is no quota for women’s representation in Parliament or incentive for women’s inclusion in political parties’ candidate lists.

What provisions for accessibility are there for voters with disabilities?

Precinct Election Commissions (PECs) in Tajikistan are typically located in schools or other municipal buildings in both urban and rural locations. These polling stations remain poorly provisioned to accommodate voters with physical disabilities. Further, PEC officials do not receive special training on how to properly assist voters with disabilities, although they receive general training on polling station layout. In order to accommodate voters with disabilities or who are sick, PECs employ a mobile ballot box that is brought to such voters’ homes on Election Day by advance request. The mobile ballot boxes are accompanied by a minimum of two election officers and may include candidate, party and international observers and a representative of local law enforcement.

² <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20200131/political-parties-nominate-89-candidates-for-41-seats-in-tajikistans-lower-chamber-of-parliament>

Is there out-of-country voting?

The Central Commission on Elections and Referendums will operate 40 voting locations outside of Tajikistan where citizens can vote. These locations will consist primarily of Tajik embassies and consulates. The majority of out-of-country voting is expected to take place by Tajik citizens residing in the Russian Federation or the Middle East.

A significant number of labor migrants, conservatively in the hundreds of thousands, reside outside Tajikistan. In theory this can be a significant constituency that receives its news free from control by the Tajik government. In previous elections the Tajik diaspora in the Russian Federation were often courted by different political parties, including the opposition. The percentage of these Tajik citizens who cast ballots on Election Day has been disputed, with the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums suggesting higher numbers than the international community. Although many seasonal workers are in Tajikistan for the winter, large numbers of citizens – representing a significant percentage of registered voters – reside abroad year-round. Data is imprecise, as official records do always track or account for these citizens. The officially reported figures on out-of-country voting, and the reconciliation with the national voter registry, is a matter of some intrigue.

What are the rules for campaign finance?

The election law provides all registered competitors in the parliamentary elections – candidates and political parties – with public funding in the equivalent of 5,000 Tajik somoni per candidate (equal to USD \$515) and 50,000 somoni to parties (equal to USD \$5,155). These funds may be augmented by a candidate's or party's own funding, which for candidates is allowed up to 29,000 somoni (approximately USD \$3,000) and for parties up to 58,000 somoni (approximately USD \$6,000).

The amount of public funding provided for the campaigns and the limitations on private funding make running a national campaign difficult for all candidates and parties, most of whom do not have access to private sums or personal resources. Citizens are not likely to contribute to election campaigns of their own volition, and "legal entities," which have the right to donate, are unlikely to do so unless pressured.

All campaign finance reporting and tracking is overseen by the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums (CCER). Candidates need to submit their financial statements, including sources and expenditure amounts, to the CCER on the day before the election.

What are the rules governing the media?

The election law permits equal access to media by all candidates and political parties. The state, however, decisively controls the media environment in Tajikistan. There is little to no independent media, and the only television companies with national reach are state-owned. Media coverage of the election tends to be general, although the People's Democratic Party has an outsized advantage in visibility. Print media is modest and concentrated in Dushanbe and larger cities. Social media is vibrant but underdeveloped as a source of genuine political discussion. There are no specific limitations on the use of social media in electoral campaigns.

Every candidate is allocated 20 minutes, and every political party 40 minutes, of free airtime on state media. Further, all parties and candidates are to receive equal space in local and national newspapers.

The State Committee on Television and Radio oversees broadcast media and assures equal access by candidates and parties together with the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums. Neither, however, monitor use of the airtime to ensure adherence to election law regulations.

In an unprecedented development, in the run-up to the elections, a government-owned weekly Tajik-language newspaper issued an edition with a blank front page. This was seemingly done to protest a lack of objective information available to journalists about the political process in Tajikistan and lack of information from government officials.³ This was the first time a state-run newspaper had used such a device to protest a lack of credible information. Journalists' lack of access to key decision-makers in government remains a fundamental difficulty in reporting news in Tajikistan, be it through print, television or online media. Censorship has also taken a toll on Tajikistan's increasingly fewer independent publications in terms of the number of journalists operating and the number of publications and original sources.

The campaign leading up to Election Day has been fairly muted. Voter education spots have appeared on state television, with posters and other print media advertisements posted to remind voters of the March 3 Election Day. Political parties and candidates have used billboards and posters to advertise their candidacies. The ruling People's Democratic Party has used social media in an attempt to engage younger voters. There have not been any party or candidate debates, however, or other live opportunities for voters to directly compare candidates' campaigns and platforms.

How are election disputes resolved?

Candidates, political parties, authorized candidate representatives, election observers and voters can file complaints and have 10 days to appeal a decision. Election disputes are resolved by election commissions and courts. Decisions of lower-level election management bodies may be appealed to the next higher-level election body or to courts. The Tajik Supreme Court makes final decisions on cases should they have merit. Should a dispute be filed within six days of the election, the appropriate adjudicating body must make a decision immediately.

Who can be an election observer, and how are observers registered?

Candidates and parties may field election observers. International observers and representatives of the media are also allowed to observe the electoral process. However, there are no provisions for independent domestic election observation by citizens or domestic, nonpartisan organizations or monitoring groups. Unlike in most countries, observers are not guaranteed unrestricted access to all stages of the election process, limiting their ability to monitor all election commission activities. Further, the accreditation of domestic and international observers ends 24 hours after the announcement of preliminary results.

³ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/centralasia/tajik-politics-2020.htm>

How will the results be calculated and when will they be announced?

Preliminary results are to be announced by the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums within 24 hours of the completion of voting, with final results announced no later than two weeks after Election Day. Should candidates running for majoritarian seats not receive 50 percent plus one of votes in the first round, a run-off election featuring the two candidates with the highest percentage of votes will take place two weeks after Election Day. Political parties will gain seats should they pass the 5 percent electoral threshold, as a percentage of votes received by all parties.

Resources

- Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Political Parties
- Constitutional Law of the Republic of Tajikistan, "On Elections to the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan"
- Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan
- The Diplomat: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/tajikistan-2020-what-to-watch-as-tajikistan-approaches-an-election-year/>
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Needs Assessment Report: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/443986>
- Global Security: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/centralasia/tajik-politics-2020.htm>
- Asia-Plus: <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/search?search=elections> and <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/power/20191204/emomali-rahmon-sets-date-for-parliamentary-elections>
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: www.rferl.org
- Eurasianet: www.eurasianet.org