



International Foundation  
for Electoral Systems

# **Elections in Tajikistan**

## *2020 Presidential Election*

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Eurasia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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## Frequently Asked Questions

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## **When is Election Day?**

The election for president of Tajikistan will take place on October 11, 2020. The upper and lower houses of the *Majlisi Oli* (Supreme Assembly) – the parliamentary body of Tajikistan – voted on August 6 to hold the election nearly one month before the traditional date for presidential elections in November. This will be the sixth presidential election in Tajikistan’s post-Soviet independent history, and the third presidential election since a 2003 constitutional amendment extended the presidential term from five to seven years. The previous presidential election was held on November 6, 2013.

The president will be directly elected by absolute majority and must secure over 50 percent of all votes cast on Election Day to win in the first round. If no candidate receives an absolute majority of votes, a second round will be held between the two candidates who receive the most votes. The second round must take place within one month, but no sooner than 15 days after the first round, or between October 26 and November 11 for this cycle. The Constitution of Tajikistan establishes that more than half of all registered voters must vote for the election to be valid; if this threshold is not reached, the election is considered “failed” and new first-round elections will be called.

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.

## **What is the current political situation?**

Tajikistan is official a republic, with three branches of government: executive, legislative and judicial. Tajikistan has a strong, semipresidential system in which officially the 96-member parliament and the Supreme Court exert checks and balances on the president, but in which factually President Emomali Rahmon wields considerable influence and authority over all three branches of government. The parliament is a bicameral legislature consisting of 33 seats in the upper, indirectly elected house and 63 seats in the lower, directly elected house. Members of parliament serve five-year terms. The president appoints the members of the Supreme Court and other key judicial positions.

Rahmon has been in office since first being elected president in 1994 amid the country’s five-year civil war, and in recent years has moved to stifle remaining political opposition and independent traditional and online media. The country remains stable on the surface, though a difficult economic situation, declining education system and continued out-migration of citizens bodes ill for the country’s long-term prospects. Rahmon is still credited by many for leading the country out of the civil war. However, for many of the country’s 8.87 million inhabitants, many of whom are too young to remember the war or the Soviet period, the rampant unemployment and growing social distress is dire, with few immediate prospects for improvement.

## **Why is the election important? What is at stake?**

The presidential election highlights current issues in Tajikistan and how the current government, namely President Emomali Rahmon, has managed them during his current seven-year tenure. The pre-election period also allows, in theory at least, a rare opportunity for opponents to outline their alternative visions for the country’s future and how they would address the myriad challenges. This would allow

voters to compare candidates' competing policy platforms and priorities and make an informed choice. The winning candidate will lead Tajikistan for the next seven years, during which it will have been independent for 30 years (2021) and stable for 30 years since the end of the Tajik Civil War (2027).

Tajikistan has had only one president since the Civil War-era election of 1994 ushered in President Rahmon (Rahmonov at the time). Due to changes in the Constitution approved by a nationwide referendum in 2016, Rahmon is eligible to run indefinitely for the presidency. While Rahmon is allowed to run for an unlimited number of terms of office, the Constitution restricts other presidential officeholders to two seven-year terms.<sup>1</sup>

Tajikistan has a strong presidential system modeled after other Central Asian countries and the Russian Federation. Within this system, the president is the single most important and influential decision-maker, setting foreign policy, strategic development and overseeing a domestic agenda focusing on national identity and enforcing social and traditional norms. President Rahmon's People's Democratic Party currently occupies nearly 75 percent of seats in the directly elected lower house of parliament.

Voters' most pressing concern as they look ahead to the presidential election is the economic situation. Tajikistan is mired in an economic downturn, as monetary remittances have declined during the coronavirus pandemic and Tajik hydroelectric energy and other exports have slowed. The country remains dependent on the Russian Federation for trade and investment, with China playing an increasingly important role. Nearly 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product is generated by monetary remittances sent by labor migrants working seasonal jobs outside the country,<sup>2</sup> chiefly Russia, and to a growing extent Turkey and Middle Eastern countries. The dependency on remittances has grown as a result of COVID-19, while job opportunities and the ability of labor migrants to travel to host countries have decreased during the pandemic.

While initially reporting an extremely low number of cases of COVID-19, particularly relative to neighboring states, it is suspected that Tajikistan had been underreporting the genuine total. Meanwhile, there had been a sudden spike in reports of "pneumonia," which possibly were the result of misdiagnoses, intentional or otherwise. The presence of COVID-19 has created unique challenges for Tajikistan, which like other countries was ill-prepared to manage the pandemic and suffers from a chronically under-resourced public health sector. The Central Commission on Elections and Referenda will need to create a safe environment for voters, observers and election officers so they will feel assured of voting in person on Election Day.

Regional affairs will also play heavily into the election campaign. To that end, Tajikistan recently reestablished full relations with neighboring Uzbekistan as part of a political détente between President Emomali Rahmon and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has worked to strengthen relations with Uzbekistan's neighbors since coming to power in 2016 following the death of longtime Uzbek

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<sup>1</sup> <http://constitutionnet.org/news/tajikistans-constitutional-referendum-legitimizing-de-facto-dictatorship#:~:text=On%2022%20May%202016%2C%20a%20reported%2095%25%20of,and%20banned%20the%20formation%20of%20faith-based%20political%20parties.>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ti.html>

President Islam Karimov. The ability to expand economic relations with its larger neighbor is a plus for Tajikistan, which includes greater ability of citizens from both nations to travel freely. Tajikistan is also expanding economic and military relations with neighboring China, taking advantage of the latter's belt-and-road initiative for economic and infrastructural investment. At the same time, the presence of large numbers of Chinese workers has contributed to local tensions and complaints by citizens to local and national government of preferential treatment given to the workers.

Tajikistan has experienced some recent security issues, headlined by the attack by five individuals affiliated with the Islamic State group on a group of international bicyclists in Khatlon Oblast in 2018. Several citizens of Tajikistan have also been captured or killed fighting for the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq. Sharing a lengthy border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan continues to cooperate with the Russian Federation on border security, with several joint patrols guarding the frontier. Russia maintains military bases in Tajikistan and has used the Ayni (Gissar) Air Force Base. In addition, it was recently revealed that China negotiated a deal with the Rahmon government to build and operate a military base in eastern Gorno-Badakhshan province, close to the borders of China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The prospect of Tajikistan "pivoting" to China for security has unnerved leaders in the Russian Federation and India, which has been locked in a recent standoff with China in the Himalayas. Security issues have long dominated life in Tajikistan, and the country remains the subject of growing "great-game" intrigue.

On the domestic political side, of the six political parties in parliament, five are allied with the current president, with only one registered opposition party, the Social Democratic Party. The previously largest opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, has been banned since 2015 when it was declared a "terrorist organization" by the government. Leaders of opposition movements such as Group 24 live in exile in Europe and Turkey, with several having been arrested or assassinated in recent years. With the absence of alternative political figures inside Tajikistan, some of the exiled opposition has in recent years worked to build support among the significant Tajik diaspora living in Russia. At this time their prospects for a return to an active political life in the country are slim.

## **Who are the candidates and what is the campaign timeline?**

The deadline for filing documents for the registration of presidential candidates was September 11, 2020. In total five candidates – all men – successfully registered, as announced by the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda (CCER). These include Rustam Latifzoda of the Agrarian Party, Abduhalim Ghafforov of the Socialist Party, Miroj Abdulloev of the Communist Party, Rustam Rahmatzoda of the Party of Economic Reforms, and the incumbent President Emomali Rahmon, who is the leader of the People's Democratic Party and was nominated by the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan and the Union of Tajikistan's Youth.<sup>3</sup>

Rahmon has served as president of Tajikistan since 1994, having prevailed in a disputed election that year against the main challenger from northern Tajikistan Abdumalik Abdullojonov. This will be Rahmon's fifth competitive election, which he is able to contest thanks to the elimination of term limits

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-nominates-rahmon-president-sixth-term/30818951.html>

enacted as part of a constitutional referendum in May 2016. The measure only applies to Rahmon himself, who was bestowed the status of “Leader of the Nation” in 2015 by the *Majlisi Oli*.

Two other candidates attempted to register but were rejected by the CCER. These include Saidjafar Usmonzoda, the leader of the Democratic Party whose registration was rejected on technical grounds, and Faromuz Irgashev, a 30-year-old lawyer from Tajikistan’s eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region whose candidacy was rejected by the CCER because he didn't submit his registration by the deadline. The Social Democratic Party, which did not register a candidate for the election, announced that it will boycott the vote.

The election campaign commenced on September 15 and will continue through October 9, with October 10, the day before voting, officially declared a “quiet day” on which all campaigning including public rallies are prohibited. With a few days remaining until Election Day, there has been a noticeable dearth of public campaigning, with no rallies or genuine debates. The candidates will start their television campaigning closer to Election Day and, considering that there has not yet been political advertising on national television, voters will have limited time to become familiar with candidates’ platforms and positions.

## **Who is eligible to run as a candidate?**

Citizens of Tajikistan between ages 30 and 65 who speak Tajik and have resided in Tajikistan for the last 10 years may be nominated for president. In 2016 the minimum age to run for president was lowered from 35 to 30. The power to nominate a candidate is restricted to registered political parties, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the Union of Youth of Tajikistan and regional councils.

Self-nominated independent candidates are not permitted to run. Presidential nominees are required to collect supporting signatures of 5 percent of the electorate to register as a candidate before the registration deadline.

## **Who can vote in this election?**

Voters who are 18 years or older on Election Day may cast ballots in the presidential election, provided they are not incarcerated or disenfranchised by a court decision. According to the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda, there are approximately 5 million eligible voters for this election. This figure includes an unknown number of labor migrants residing abroad. Attempts to approximate the number of registered voters in Tajikistan are complicated by the absence of a central voter register. Voter lists, which are compiled at the local level by Precinct Election Commissions (PECs) and confirmed with a door-to-door check, are only made public 15 days prior to Election Day. From the time voter lists are published through the end of Election Day, a voter may be added to a supplementary voter list by presenting their passport or another state-issued identity document to PEC officials.

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 military bases.

Voters will cast ballots at approximately 3,375 polling stations across Tajikistan and at 39 out-of-country polling stations in 29 countries.

## **What laws regulate presidential elections in Tajikistan?**

Three key documents regulate presidential elections in Tajikistan:

- Constitution of Tajikistan
- Constitutional Law on Elections of the President, also known as the Presidential Election Law
- Central Commission on Elections and Referenda instructions and resolutions

These core documents are augmented by provisions of other legislation. These include applicable clauses contained in the Law on Periodical Print and Other Mass Media; the Law on Political Parties; the Law on Assemblies, Rallies, Activities and Demonstrations; the Code of Administrative Offences; and the Criminal Code.

## **How will the campaigns be financed?**

Each registered candidate is entitled to state funding from the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda (CCER) for the 2020 presidential election campaign. Additionally, nominating bodies may spend funds in support of their candidate's campaign.

While the CCER requires candidates to submit financial reports by October 25, the law does not require any reporting or oversight of campaign finance.

## **What is the election management body? What are its powers?**

Elections in Tajikistan are managed by the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda (CCER), which oversees 41 District Election Commissions – one for each majoritarian parliamentary district – and approximately 3,375 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 is the highest and only permanent electoral body in Tajikistan. Its members are appointed to five-year terms, with the current term spanning 2020-24. The president proposes the 15 CCER members, including the chairperson and deputy chairperson, who must be confirmed by the lower chamber of parliament.

The CCER is principally responsible for ensuring preparation and conduct of elections and referendums in Tajikistan. The CCER is guided by the Constitution of Tajikistan, the Presidential Election Law and its own instructions and resolutions, as well as provisions of other laws that pertain to elections.

The CCER has a wide mandate to set electoral boundaries, register candidates, 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.

There will be 10,000 volunteers across Tajikistan involved in the presidential election. Of these, 250 persons fluent in Tajik, Russian and English will be available to assist international observers. The volunteers will also take part in preparations for the elections, including assisting with drawing up voter lists, registering voters, distributing voter information materials, organizing meetings with voters and accompanying international observers.<sup>4</sup> Citing concerns with the upcoming vote, western, international organizations have not provided technical assistance to the CCER.

## **What are election authorities doing to safeguard the elections and voters during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

The Central Commission on Elections and Referenda (CCER) reported that it is taking all necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the election and indicate they are enabling Precinct Election Commissions to adhere to all hygiene and sanitary norms. To that end, each Precinct Election Commission will be supplied with antiseptics for cleaning on Election Day; check-in tables staffed by polling officials will be located at a certain distance from one another; and voters and observers will be required to maintain strict social distancing while they are in the polling stations. The CCER has indicated as well that masks will be required in the polling stations and it will provide hand sanitizer or spray to all polling stations. There has not been a directive to take voters' temperatures upon entering the polling station, however.

The information provided publicly by the CCER related to COVID-19 has been relayed through the media.

No posters or public announcements have been made as part of a separate voter education campaign about COVID-19 measures during the election.

## **How many polling places will be set up on Election Day?**

Voting will take place in 3,375 Precinct Election Commissions set up on Election Day, supported by 68 District Election Commissions.

The Central Commission on Elections and Referendums (CCER) will operate 39 voting locations in 26 countries outside Tajikistan where citizens located internationally 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 estimated in the hundreds of thousands, reside outside Tajikistan. The percentage of these Tajik citizens who cast ballots on Election Day has been disputed, with the CCER suggesting higher numbers than the international community. Although many seasonal workers are still abroad until winter, large numbers of citizens – representing a significant percentage of registered voters – reside abroad year-round. Data is imprecise, as official records do not

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<sup>4</sup> <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20200921/up-to-10-thousand-volunteers-will-participate-in-the-presidential-elections-in-tajikistan>

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 is the media environment?**

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. Tajikistan ranks 161st out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom index<sup>5</sup> as reported by Reporters Without Borders.

Media coverage of the election has to date been tilted toward incumbent President Rahmon, with the People's Democratic Party having an outsized advantage in public visibility through the president's office, which translates into press coverage by the tightly controlled national media outlets. 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.

In Tajikistan, national television channels are the primary source of political information. Candidate debates were conducted for this election, but these have turned out mainly to be candidates reading their platform initiatives absent of back-and-forth discussion or challenges. All national television channels are state-owned, and private broadcast media only operate regionally. Despite this, Tajikistan enjoys a relatively diverse media environment. While internet use throughout the country remains modest outside Dushanbe, mobile phone use is extensive, and news sources on social media have played an increasingly important role in urban areas, although access to these sites is occasionally blocked by the government.

Campaign coverage is regulated by the Presidential Election Law. Registered candidates have the right to participate on an equal basis in the pre-election campaign, including the use of state media. The Central Commission on Elections and Referenda (CCER) allocates free airtime on state-run television and radio and equal space in all state-run newspapers to each registered candidate. Candidate proxies are afforded additional free airtime. This gives candidates an opportunity to present their electoral platforms to the Tajik public.

## **Who can observe during Election Day? How can they get accreditation?**

On Election Day, in-country observation may only be conducted by media and bodies that nominated candidates – namely registered political parties, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the Union of Youth of Tajikistan and regional councils. The law does not provide for nonpartisan citizen observers.

International observers are provided for in law, and less than 50 are expected for the presidential election. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights announced deployment of an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) on September 28 following an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The EAM team consists of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/tajikistan>

seven international staff from six OSCE states and will “assess the electoral process in terms of its compliance with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections, as well as national legislation.”<sup>6</sup> The Commonwealth of Independent States recently deployed a long-term observer delegation to Tajikistan, which began monitoring the election campaign on September 21, 2020.

### **How will election disputes be adjudicated?**

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 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.

### **When will official results be announced?**

Preliminary results are to be announced by the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda within 24 hours of the completion of voting, with final results announced no later than two weeks after Election Day. Should no candidate receive 50 percent of the vote in the first round of voting, a run-off election featuring the two candidates with the highest percentage of votes will take place two weeks after Election Day.

### **What provisions are in place to support the equal rights of 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. 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 local law enforcement representative.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/465060>

## Resources

- Law on Elections for the President of the Republic of Tajikistan
- Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Political Parties
- Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan
- [Website of the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda of Tajikistan](#)
- [The Diplomat](#)
- [Asia-Plus](#)
- [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#)
- [Eurasianet](#)
- [The World Factbook](#)
- [Constitutionnet.org](#)

## IFES in Tajikistan

Upon securing new assistance awards in the early 2000s from the United States Agency for International Development and Department of State following support provided in implementing the Comprehensive Accords on Peace and Reconciliation that ended the civil war in 1997, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) began a long-term technical assistance project with the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda. IFES assisted in professional development, capacity-building, communications, outreach, procedural reform and training for lower-level election management bodies. IFES also worked with members of parliament and legal professionals to further reform the electoral legal framework to align it with international standards.

In addition to providing assistance in the conduct of fair, transparent and inclusive elections, IFES supported a comprehensive political party development program, working with all legally registered political parties and their branch offices on platform development, constituent outreach and relations, fundraising strategies and issue-based campaign development. IFES sponsored national and regional candidate debates and conducted regional election fairs prior to elections.

IFES also worked intensively on civic education for secondary schools, partnering with the Ministry of Education and independent educators to introduce the first dedicated civic education course for in-school use, based on an interactive classroom management approach. The course was introduced into secondary schools across the country in Tajik, Russian and Uzbek languages. IFES augmented this course with several extracurricular civic education projects for students, including Student Local Government Days, university discussion clubs, student action committees and Democracy Summer Camps. IFES also engaged equality programming, working with civil society organization including Traditions & Modernity to deliver leadership and skill-building sessions for women and girls regionally through direct training and participation in camps.

## Disclosure

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Tajik election authorities as of October 9, 2020, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.