THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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TAJIKISTAN:
No Prizes for Guessing Election Results

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DUSHANBE, Nov 5 (IPS) - Many Tajiks say they already know who will win their country's presidential elections on Monday -- whether or not they turn out at the polls.

"I don't plan to vote because I already know who will win," said 34-year-old Uzro Nazarova, who works in a government office.

President Emomali Rahmonov, who has led Tajikistan since 1992, is expected to win another 7-year term by a landslide. Four obscure candidates are also running, but they are widely seen as pro-government.

Rahmonov's critics say he has silenced independent media and jailed opposition leaders. And two opposition parties are boycotting the vote, saying it will be neither free nor fair. Despite this criticism, many Tajiks support Rahmonov and credit him for bringing stability to their country, which gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 only to be thrust into a devastating civil war that ended in 1997.

Rahmonov is the only person strong enough to prevent the country from falling into another civil war says 34-year-old Negina Davlatova. "I like Rahmonov and want him to win," said Negina, who cleans offices for a living. "He's a good president. He developed the whole city of Dushanbe."

Tajikistan's civil war ended after Rahmonov signed a peace accord that required him to give a 30 percent share in government to the rebel United Tajik Opposition, an alliance that included the Islamic Revival Party. The IRP, which is Central Asia's only legal Islamic political party and Tajikistan's largest opposition party, is also not taking part in the elections. It has said it wants to prepare itself for future elections instead, after its longtime leader, Sayed Abdullo Nuri, died of cancer in August.

While the absence of serious competition in this year's elections does not surprise many Tajiks, they are still using the opportunity to voice their rising demands from Rahmonov's government. Many are calling for a better economy. They say now that their country has become more stable, the government should use this stability to strengthen the economy.

"People used to say all the time they wanted stability," said Zarrineh Khoshvaqt, a local journalist who often covers women's and social issues. "Now a lot of people feel that stability has come, so they want the economy to improve."

"For example, women living in rural areas have told me the government should build at least one factory between two villages so they can work," she added. "Young graduates of engineering are getting 20 US dollars a month to work in a factory. With 20 dollars a month, how can you live in Tajikistan? No one can."

Tajikistan is the poorest of the countries that used to make up the former Soviet Union, according to the United Nations. The World Bank says 64 percent of the population lives on less than 2.15 dollars a day.

Many economists believe up to one million of Tajikistan's roughly 6.5 million people work abroad, mostly in Russia, to earn higher wages and send money back to their families. Some say that unless Rahmonov's government strengthens the economy, Tajikistan's culture and society will not develop.

"The economy is improving," said Khorshid Nazarov, a local journalist working for a foreign agency. "But still, many children don't go to school and instead wash cars or work in the bazaar to make money."

Still, many here say the economy is slowly improving , driven mainly by high prices for its primary exports -- aluminium and cotton -- and also because of Rahmonov.

"Rahmonov is bringing stability to the country, which helps the economy, so it's good he will be re-elected," said one economist, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "But his government needs to work harder to fight corruption, improve tax collection, and make the environment attractive for foreign investors."

Rahmonov is also becoming a key player in international relations, according to some foreign observers. They say countries such as the United States, Russia and China are interested in working with Tajikistan to fight terrorism and build stability in the region.

Rahmonov's government has allowed the United States over-flight rights to access insurgency-ridden Afghanistan, Tajikistan's troubled neighbor to the south. And according to the U.S. State Department website, Washington and Dushanbe have been cooperating to prevent the transit of drugs and to prevent the spread of radical groups and terrorism in the region.

Critics, however, say Rahmonov has exaggerated the threat of terrorism and radical Islamic groups to clamp down on opposition to his government. They say he should be aware that these efforts could backfire, attracting more Tajiks, especially the young and poor, to Islamic radicalism.

For now, Rahmonov is firmly in the saddle having overseen constitutional changes that allow him to stay in power until 2020. (FIN/2006)

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