Tajikistan anticipates many public sector reforms in 2020, while urgent issues hover. Muslimbek Buriev, a participant of the CABAR.asia School of Analytics, reveals what tasks the state authorities have set and what nuances are present in there.

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Tajikistan has entered a new decade with both accumulated experience and multiple problems that have existed in the country for more than a year. The following events come to the forefront of Tajikistan’s domestic political life in 2020: elections, digitization, a new tax code, reform of power structures and promotion of natural sciences under the aegis of the year of education. Resolving border disputes remains an important aspect of foreign policy. The insides of Tajikistan’s baggage on the threshold of subsequent 2021 depends on the effectiveness of tasks and reforms implementation.

**2020 as a priority for the development of sciences**

To begin with, the years 2020-2040 were declared by the President of Tajikistan as the years of education and development of the natural and mathematical sciences. Despite the generally low quality of education in Tajikistan, there is still the potential to develop sciences. However, the fulfillment of this potential most probably concerns private schools or state gymnasiums of mathematics and programming.

The last two years have also demonstrated the reasonable interest of young people in high technology, especially with entrepreneurial activity. At first, this movement was supported by private initiatives, that is, by large commercial structures (holdings or mobile operators). Then international organizations have joined the trend while stimulating the development of youth entrepreneurship using IT tools.

Such development evokes positive emotions and gives hope for a bright future of the country’s youth. However, the following apparent flaws in this matter should be considered.

First, the *lack of government involvement in promoting the study of sciences, stimulating the development of high technologies and programming*. All the initiatives come from other actors, while state agencies act as beneficiaries.
Second, the scope of such initiatives is limited only to Dushanbe or major cities. In the meantime, young people from smaller towns or villages are still forced to change their residence in search of educational or professional prospects.

"The Blind Men and the Elephant" or How Realistic Is Innovative Development in Tajikistan?

Thirdly, an integrated approach is required to advance the natural sciences. The state attempts to provide educational institutions with computers, but this is only a means, not an end. Undoubtedly, one cannot work without computer technology and equipment. However, speaking of sciences and vast potential, one should not forget about other important areas for the country’s development: biology, engineering, geology, water resources and so on. Information technologies (programming, etc.) can act as tools to modernize the acquisition and application of knowledge in sciences. That is why we need to change the teaching methods and attract the right specialists.

Although the “20 years for the development of sciences” has just begun and there are two more decades left before the deadline, we must take steps now. Addressing the poor-quality education under prevailing conditions is impossible. As a result, extracurricular initiatives can be of great help. The state can either independently participate in the opening of training centers or create conditions to facilitate the functioning of private institutions. But given the level of income in the very same regions, the state will have to play a major role in analogous initiatives.

Large-scale implementation of data storage systems in 2020?

Active discussions have been held in the post-Soviet space over the past two years on the introduction of surveillance cameras with facial recognition. Actively operating in China, security technology has attracted the leadership of countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Over the last summer, it was also reported on the introduction of such cameras in large cities of Tajikistan to combat crime more effectively. The discussion of this issue in civil society is insufficient; public reports on the effectiveness of using those
cameras are yet to be provided by the authorities. The main issue that can be raised is a privacy issue: in this case, to what extent will citizens’ data be protected? Where will the information be stored? Which institutions will have access to the data? How high is the risk that the data will be used against the citizens?

The collection of fingerprints and digitization of all the data available in the passport may suggest the preparation for large-scale implementation of data storage systems.

It is too early to talk about widespread adoption on a country scale, but it is possible and preferable to introduce it in test mode. These expectations are followed by the massive collection of biometric data through the mandatory transition of all citizens to plastic passports. The collection of fingerprints and digitization of all the data available in the passport may suggest the preparation for large-scale implementation of data storage systems. Given that the authorities obligated the new passports to be tied to mobile numbers under the threat of disconnection, it seems possible to monitor all the activities of each citizen: calls, messages, etc. Dystopia is not anticipated, nevertheless, the trends are visible against the background of the lack of official statements.

**Police Reform in Tajikistan: What Should Be the Priority?**

Another issue of domestic security is police reform. The reform implementation concept designated 2020 as the final year. The results so far do not inspire confidence. The level of interaction between law enforcement agencies and the population is still low, despite the opening of centers for cooperation between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the public and advanced training of police officers. The level of public confidence in the police is also not promising. However, there is potential for strengthening ties with civil society, which is gradually involved in the implementation of the reform project. 2020 will most likely not be the final year for law enforcement reform – too much needs to be done, too many needs to be retrained.

**2020 with old challenges is a matter of boundaries**
The border issue for Tajikistan is a key in foreign policy as to its closest neighbors. One of the disputes was resolved in January of this year when the Uzbek authorities announced the completion of demining their section on the border with Tajikistan. Only the issue of border demarcation remains open between the two states, which is underway since early January. Tajikistan is gradually reaching a full understanding with Uzbekistan concerning borders. However, after the attack on the Ishkobod border post on the Tajik-Uzbek border in November last year, the issue of border security will probably be raised as part of bilateral meetings. Uzbekistan, which mined the border with Tajikistan fearing the penetration of power groups, may as well be concerned about the reliability of the Tajik border.

The Tajik-Kyrgyz border case, particularly the Vorukh enclave in the territory of the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, is a much worse case. Clashes between border guards and local residents occur for several years already. Many attempts have been made to resolve the conflict on the territory, including personal meetings between Emomali Rakhmon and Sooronbai Jeenbekov. However, there are no results so far. The Kyrgyz side reports on the unwillingness of Tajik colleagues to make compromises on this issue. Tajikistan did not make any harsh statements. This year the discussion possibly will be brought to the international level with the involvement of international organizations or third countries to find ways to effectively and inclusively resolve border disputes. This is the only way left considering the prior unsuccessful attempts to resolve the issue.

The problem of strengthening its borders is of interest not only to Tajikistan but also to China. The latter has been participating in military exercises with Tajikistan in the east of the country for two years in a row. The main priority for China is to deter radical forces on the border with the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Tajikistan acts for China as a partner who knows the peculiarities of fighting in the mountains. Therefore, exercises are held in the Pamirs, not far from the border with Afghanistan. Everything is moving towards a rapprochement between the two countries in the framework of military cooperation. However, we do not expect radical changes in the direction of rapprochements like general
pacts or treaties. The military power of Tajikistan in the region is not comparable with Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, which is of limited interest to China.

**The tax burden for cultural and sporting events?**

Over the past two years, the state has pursued a policy of raising additional funds in various sectors of the economy: raise in prices for housing and communal services, tourist tax, an attempt to increase prices and establish uniform mobile tariffs. These measures are taken to replenish the state budget. At the same time, authorities argue they plan to spend about 1 billion somonis (more than $100 million) on cultural and sporting events. This decision raises many questions as to the appropriateness of spending money, amounted to the level of expenditures for the agricultural, industrial and construction industries combined.

There is also an issue with taxes: mobile operators remain the largest companies in Tajikistan while having huge tax arrears. Taxation in Tajikistan is tough, especially when it comes to large businesses, the main source of taxes. The analogous policy will stay with certain changes. A draft new tax code is now being prepared and should enter into force this fall. Nothing is known about specific changes and amendments.

A positive thing is that the authorities accepted the proposals of private individuals and entrepreneurs. They are primarily interested in updating the tax policy of the country. The president of the country, in turn, promised to increase the salaries of public sector employees. However, the availability of funds for such a step remains a big question.

**Tajikistan: Why Is Rogun HPP Construction Delayed?**

In the meantime, the state needs additional funds for the most vital project during independence years. Rogun HPP requires additional funds to complete the construction. The Tajik authorities turned to the World Bank for help, which offered to provide financing for the construction of Rogun by attracting private funds. The proposal refers to the beginning of station design and massive fundraising among the population in exchange for shares. This
time, the government will most likely turn to large businesses. Another option is to increase various tariffs for the population. It will ultimately replenish the budget for additional financing for the construction of the hydropower plant. In this case, the government must seek a balance in the preparation of a new tax code.

New Parliament - Old Constituents?

This year, Tajikistan is expecting two important events in domestic politics. The elections in the Majlisi Oli (Parliament) of the republic will be held on March 1. The election campaign of candidates this year is notable for its distinguishability but still far from the formation of a full-fledged political culture in the country.

Public awareness of candidates and party programs is similarly at the low level. The parliament in modern realities is difficult to perceive as a representative body of people’s interests and as a tool to maintain balance in the decision-making process. For example, 51 out of 63 in the Majlisi Namoyandagon (lower house) are representatives of the ruling People’s Democratic Party.

Legislative activity lies with the ministries and the president, who also has the authority to annul any decision made by any of the departments. *Parliament functions but does not go beyond the general direction of government policy, ultimately depriving itself of the function of providing an alternative to political decisions.*

Opposition parties operating in the country have very low influence. Their actions are limited and campaigning platforms are rarely allocated. As a result, they get few seats in the Majlisi Namoyandagon (from 2 to 4) and, in fact, cannot be an effective counterweight to the ruling party even after joining the coalition.

A recent report by the ODIHR (OSCE body) indicated that their mission of parliamentary elections observation has no effect. The conclusion was reached by European bureaucrats after several missions conducted by the invitation of the Government of Tajikistan.

Therefore, describing the conditions, it is difficult to refer to parliamentary elections as a key event. As sad as it might be, the outcome will have little or no significance for political life.

Another political event that everyone anticipates is the presidential election. The first elections after the current president was awarded the status of the Founder of Peace and Unity, which gives the right to run for the presidency countless times. Will Emomali Rahmon
run for office this time or will he allow his son to take a new step in his political career? Rustam Emomali is now the mayor of Dushanbe and managed to gain required support among the population of the capital in a short time, having earned the status of an innovator.

It is difficult to tell whether the mayor of Dushanbe is ready to go further, especially with a huge number of unresolved issues. Rustam Emomali will most likely wait a while with his candidacy. Besides, he is already a candidate for the deputy of the Majlis of people’s deputies of Dushanbe (local government). This step can be assessed as an unhurried promotion to the highest state post. Thus, the “transfer of power” is not quite expected.

Vis-à-vis the opposition’s nominee for the presidency, the opposition in the country is not as active as in the last presidential election. The last time the Social Democrats and the now-banned Islamic Renaissance Party united in a coalition and nominated a common candidate, Oinihol Bobonazarova, which turned out to be a failure already at the stage of collecting signatures in support of the candidate.
It is difficult to tell whether the mayor of Dushanbe is ready to go further, especially with a huge number of unresolved issues. Photo: Eurasianet.org

Regarding the significance of the upcoming presidential elections for the political life of Tajikistan, one can say absolutely the same thing as about the prior elections. There are no other popular candidates in the country; the president’s reputation among the people is unshakable. Even if Rustam Emomali will run, we cannot expect any significant shifts. The current course will endure, we can expect only a few decisions aimed at increasing popularity. Opportunities for innovation and the transition to better governance at all levels will still be unattainable.

Conclusions

2020 in the history of Tajikistan will not be distinguished by anything special. The country will persist to seek solutions to the aforesaid problems, simultaneously requesting assistance from international institutions. An awareness of the need to reform various sectors of the economy is still the same. However, there are not enough opportunities and experience.

For example, the situation on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border requires flexible measures to come to a common solution. Law enforcement agencies need to be reformed at all levels, preferably with the use of constant supervision and monitoring of their activities. The new tax code should make significant easing to create a favorable climate for both local entrepreneurs and foreign investors. The corruption problem certainly remains the main obstacle to all areas of socio-economic development.

There are glimpses that the development path is not that complicated but coordination with civil society and the media is necessary for constant monitoring, ongoing reforms and proposed bills. The establishment of public relations can be increasingly traced in various political initiatives. This is one of the few positive trends in the country. If we follow this dialogue format without opposition and antagonism, then we can take the political development path, which is just as important as the economy, education and other spheres.

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How is Tajikistan entering 2020? Results and Trends