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Evolution of the Constitutional System of the Republic of Tajikistan

Keywords: Republic of Tajikistan, constitution, referendum, parliament (Majlisi Oli), president

Słowa kluczowe: Republika Tadżykistanu, konstytucja, referendum, parlament (Madžlisi Oli), prezydent

Abstract

The Republic of Tajikistan gained independence in consequence of the break-up of the Soviet Union and, for the first time in its history, had started to build a constitutional system modeled after democratic states. Tajikistan's system of government is governed by the constitution adopted on November 6, 1994 in a national constitutional referendum. The country's constitutional system is evolving. Its constitution has been amended three times so far. The changes affected the legal position of the head of state, were intended to allow the incumbent President to remain in power, and were made before an upcoming presidential election. The amendments to the constitution included transformation of the parliament into a bicameral parliament, introduction of a presidential form of government, and a number of other important changes. All amendments to the constitution were approved by the nation in a national referendum. The constitutional system appears to be stable but may evolve further. The question that remains is: In which direction will it evolve?

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Streszczenie**Ewolucja ustroju konstytucyjnego Republiki Tadżykistanu**

Republika Tadżykistanu uzyskała niepodległość w wyniku rozpadu Związku Radzieckiego i po raz pierwszy w swojej historii rozpoczęła budowę ustroju konstytucyjnego wzorowanego na państwach demokratycznych. Ustrój państwa reguluje ustawa zasadnicza przyjęta 6 listopada 1994 r. w ogólnonarodowym referendum konstytucyjnym. Ustrój konstytucyjny podlega ewolucji. Konstytucja była dotychczas trzykrotnie nowelizowana. Zmiany dotyczyły pozycji prawnej głowy państwa w celu umożliwienia utrzymania się u władzy urzędującemu prezydentowi i były dokonywane przed kolejnymi wyborami prezydenckimi. W ramach nowelizacji konstytucji zreformowano parlament przekształcając go w parlament dwuizbowy, wprowadzono prezydencką formę rządów oraz dokonano szeregu innych ważnych zmian. Wszystkie nowelizacje konstytucji zatwierdzane były przez naród w ogólnonarodowym referendum. Ustrój konstytucyjny wydaje się być stabilny, może jednak podlegać dalszej ewolucji. Otwarte pozostaje pytanie w jakim kierunku?

I. Introduction

The region of Central Asia includes five countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. They are all former republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). After the fall of communism and the break-up of the USSR, all Central Asian republics declared independence and began the difficult process of building new constitutional systems. This process took a particularly interesting course in the Republic of Tajikistan. Tajikistan is the poorest country in the region and is plagued by many years of conflict and civil war, with active and strong Sunni orthodox² Islamic organizations supported by *Taliban*³ and *Al-Qa'ida*⁴.

² *Taliban* is a fundamentalist Sunni Islamic group established by Koranic school students in 1994 in Afghanistan.

³ *Al-Qa'ida* is a terrorist Sunni organization established in 1988 in Pakistan.

⁴ Sunnism is one of the main factions of Islam. It is professed by about 80% of all Muslims in the world.

The country has a border with Afghanistan and is located on the largest drug (heroin) smuggling route used by organized international criminal groups. All these factors, together with the ongoing competition for influence in this area between the Russian Federation, the PRC, and the USA, have had a fundamental impact on the transformation of Tajikistan's constitutional system into its present form. The Republic of Tajikistan has no tradition of independence and has never been a sovereign state. Tajikistan as a state and legal entity, of course with very limited competences and a limited role, only appeared in the 1920s after the establishment of the Soviet rule in Central Asia. The main objective of this publication is to determine the most important stages of the formation of the contemporary constitutional order of the Republic of Tajikistan and to answer the fundamental question of whether and in what direction it can evolve further.

II. Origin of the Constitutional System of the Republic of Tajikistan

The origin of the Tajik constitutionalism dates back to the Soviet times. It is connected with the separation of Tajikistan from the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and the formation of a substitute for Tajikistan's statehood within the USSR. During the period of existence of the Tajik Socialist Soviet Republic (TSSR), four constitutions were adopted. The first constitution was adopted on April 29, 1929 by the Second Congress of the Councils of the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASRR). The second constitution (the first constitution of the TSRR) was passed on February 24, 1931 during the fourth Congress of the Councils of the TSRR. The third constitution, called Stalin's Constitution, was passed on March 1, 1937 during the sixth extraordinary Congress of the Councils of the TSRR. The last, fourth, constitution was adopted on April 14, 1977 during the eighth session of the Supreme Council of the TSRR⁵. All the constitutions from the Soviet period faithfully copied the institutions and solutions contained in the constitutions of the USSR adopted before them. It could be

⁵ More on the Tajik constitution of the Soviet period and its origins can be found in: А.А. Класс, *Исторический опыт конституционного строительства в Таджикистане*, <http://www.dslib.net/istoria-otechestva/istoricheskij-opyt-konstitucionnogo-stroitelstva-v-tadzhikistane.html> (9.10.2019).

said that they were republican copies of the Soviet Constitution for years 1924, 1936, and 1977, respectively. The last example of faithful copying of constitutional solutions from the union-wide constitution into the republican constitution is the Tajik constitution of 1978. It introduced, as the 1977 Constitution of the USSR did, such solutions as declarations on the building of a communist state and the leading role of the Tajik communist party and emphasized that the exercise of rights and freedoms by citizens must not be detrimental to the interests of the society and the state. Tajik constitutionalism has its origins in the Soviet period and has developed for over sixty years in this political model with all its legal and political consequences.

Creation of the modern constitutional system of the Republic of Tajikistan is connected with the process of disintegration of the USSR in the years 1989–1991, the declaration of independence announced by the Supreme Council on September 9, 1991, and the adoption of the constitution in a national referendum on November 6, 1994. The process of gaining Tajikistan's first ever independence coincided with the outbreak of a civil war between the Islamic opposition, led by the Islamic Party of Tajikistan, which demanded creation of an Islamic state and the introduction of Koranic law, and the post-communist nomenclature. As a result of the signing on September 17, 1994 of an agreement that temporarily ended the conflict, parliamentary elections to the unicameral parliament – Supreme Council – and presidential elections were held and won by Emomali Sharipovich Rahmonov⁶ who received 58.7% of the votes⁷.

In the Republic of Tajikistan, constitutional committees in the Supreme Council were established three times: in August 1990, February 1992, and June 1993. The main reason for the prolonged constitutional process was the dete-

⁶ Since 2007, when Emomali Rahmon changed his name. From 1994 until today, the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. Former member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Pursuant to Act No. 1259 of the Republic of Tajikistan of December 25, 2015, on the Founder of Peace and National Unity – the Nation's Leader, he has the official title of "Founder of Peace and National Unity – the Nation's Leader" ("Millions of Peshwa"), The text of the Act can be found on: <http://president.tj/ru/taxonomy/term/5/951> (9.10.2019).

⁷ *Декларация о суверенитете Таджикской Республики*, Душанбе 1991. The current text of the Constitution is available on the official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan: <http://www.prezident.tj/ru/taxonomy/term/5/112> (9.10.2019). J. Matwiejuk, *Rosja*, [in:] *Systemy ustrojowe państw współczesnych*, eds. S. Bożyk, M. Grzybowski, Białystok 2012, pp. 278–279.

rioration of the socio-political situation⁸. The first constitutional committee started its work on the new Soviet constitution of Tajikistan. The work ended with the dissolution of the USSR. Following the declaration of independence, constitutional work accelerated and a constitutional committee was set up in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Tajikistan in February 1992 with the aim to prepare a draft constitution for the newly independent state. The outbreak of a civil war temporarily interrupted the work on the draft constitution until 1993. In June 1993, the Supreme Council appointed new members of the Constitutional Committee headed by the then Chairman of the Supreme Council E.Sh. Rahmonov. The committee had 65 members. The members of the constitutional committee were members of the Supreme Council, representatives of all regions of the country, representatives of political parties, non-governmental organizations, and national minorities. In November 1993, the Presidium of the Supreme Council adopted a resolution on the creation of a working group of 11 people with the task of drafting a constitution that would consider Tajikistan's unique national, socio-economic, political, cultural and historical characteristics. In 1994, two draft constitutions were submitted to the Constitutional Committee. The Constitutional Committee recommended the first draft to the Supreme Council. The Supreme Council subsequently adopted a resolution to subject the draft constitution to a nationwide referendum on 6 November 1994⁹. The Tajik people adopted the Basic Law in the first national constitutional referendum in Tajikistan's history. According to official data, 95.70% of the voters voted in favor of the new constitution, while 4.28% voted against it¹⁰. The nation's acceptance of the con-

⁸ А.С. Достиев, *Конституция Республики Таджикистан 1994 года: История разработки, принятия и основные положения*, Душанбе 1999, <https://www.disserscat.com/content/konstitutsiya-respubliki-tadzhikistan-1994-goda-istoriya-razrabotki-prinyatiya-i-osnovnye-po> (9.10.2019).

⁹ More information on the origins and the process of preparation of the draft constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan can be found in: А. Имомов, *Процесс подготовки и принятия новой Конституции Республики Таджикистан*, "Серия: Философия и право" 1995, No. 3, pp. 2–16; А. Имомов, *Конституционно-правовые проблемы развития Республики Таджикистан (1992–1998)*, Душанбе 1998.

¹⁰ F. Grotz, *Tajikistan*, [in:] D. Nohlen, F. Grotz, Ch. Hartmann, *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook: Volume I: Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia*, Oxford 2001, p. 462.

stitution made it possible to start a slow process of building a new constitutional system and finally break with the previous political system¹¹.

III. The Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan

The characteristic feature of the constitutional system of the Republic of Tajikistan is its volatility. After the nation approved the constitution in a nationwide referendum held on 6 November 1994, the system underwent three major changes. This was done by amending the constitution in order, in particular, to strengthen the position of the incumbent President and ensure that he could remain in power essentially for life. Another important element of the constitutional changes was the transformation of the unicameral parliament into a bicameral parliament. Other constitutional provisions, such as those concerning political pluralism, were modified at the occasion of changes that were of key importance to the constitutional system. The changes in the constitutional system of the Republic of Tajikistan were linked to the evolution and changes in the current political situation and the upcoming presidential elections. Of note is the fact that all constitutional changes were implemented before the end of the president's term of office and in view of the upcoming presidential elections.

A constitution is the highest legal act forming the political system of a state¹². Amendments to this act are, therefore, closely linked to the issues related to¹³ that system. In order to systematize the deliberations, it is first necessary to explain the meaning of the basic concepts related to the amendment of a constitution, such as an amendment and a revision of a constitution. In the doctrine of constitutional law, an amendment of a constitution is not a uniform concept. An amendment of a constitution is defined in the theory of constitutional law as repealing or giving different content to all or some of the provi-

¹¹ Э. Рахмонов, *Таджикистан на пути демократии и цивилизованного общества*, Душанбе 1996, pp. 145–146.

¹² Article 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan. A characteristic feature of a constitution is the lack of regulation concerning the sources of law.

¹³ A. Bień-Kacała, *Rewizja czy zmiana konstytucji?* (*Charakter prawny nowelizacji konstytucji z 1989 r.*), "Studia Iuridica Toruniensia" 2010, vol. VI, p. 95.

sions of a constitution, as well as issuing new constitutional norms, in a procedure applicable to such an amendment¹⁴. A revision of a constitution should be understood as a change in the provisions of a constitution that are of fundamental importance. The difference between an amendment of a constitution and a revision of a constitution is, therefore, fundamental and concerns the significance of the changed constitutional matter. It should be emphasized that not every amendment of a constitution is a revision of a constitution. However, every revision of a constitution is a change of a constitution. The gradation of constitutional changes is not precisely defined¹⁵.

The fundamental determinant of the evolution of the constitutional system was the amendments of the constitution. The constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan has been amended three times so far: on September 26, 1999, June 22, 2003, and May 22, 2016. Therefore, three stages can be identified in the evolution of the constitutional system of the Republic of Tajikistan. All amendments were carried out at the request of the parliament in a nationwide referendum organized on the basis of the constitution and the constitutional law of the Republic of Tajikistan of November 4, 1995 on the referendum of the Republic of Tajikistan¹⁶. The President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Ramon, the *de facto* person number one in the state and the actual author and initiator of the proposed changes¹⁷, each time unofficially decided on the choice of the proposed amendments to the constitution. Let us highlight the changes that ultimately enabled him to stay in office and to be re-elected in 1999, 2006, and 2013. Given the political situation in Tajikistan, this can be considered as a particularly important so-called constitutional

¹⁴ B. Banaszak, *Prawo konstytucyjne*, Warsaw 2008, p. 64.

¹⁵ More information on this topic can be found in: W. Sokolewicz, *O gradacji zmian konstytucji*, [in:] *Konstytucja, wybory, parlament: studia ofiarowane Zdzisławowi Jarosławowi*, ed. L. Garlicki, Warsaw 2000, pp. 182–192.

¹⁶ Конституционный Закон Республики Таджикистан от 4 ноября 1995 года О референдуме Республики Таджикистан, Ахбори Маҷлиси Оли Республикаи Таджикистан, 1995 год, № 21, ст. 245; 2001 г., № 4, ст. 212; 2008 г., № 12, ч. 1, ст. 983.

¹⁷ <https://tajmedun.tj/ru/novosti/universitet/ob-istorii-nezavisimosti-tadzhikistana> (9.10.2019).

moment, i.e. the conditions under which the need to amend the current constitution¹⁸ becomes obvious.

The first stage of the evolution of the constitutional system of the Republic of Tajikistan was started by a nationwide constitutional referendum held on September 26, 1999, which was initiated at the request of the then unicameral parliament – the Supreme Council. During the first constitutional referendum on the amendment of the constitution, the wording of the Article 65 of the Constitution, which regulates the terms of office of the President of the Republic, was changed. The term of office of the President was extended from five years to seven years. A provision was also introduced that allows re-election of the president for no more than one further term of office. At the same time, for the first time in Tajikistan's history, a two-chamber parliament, Majlisi Oli, was established. The Parliament of the Republic of Tajikistan is recognized as the highest representative and legislative body of the Republic of Tajikistan. Majlisi Oli consists of two Majlisis (Chambers). The first chamber is the House of Representatives (Majlisi Namojandagon), which is composed of 63 representatives. The second chamber is the National Council (Majlisi Milli), which has 33 members. The terms of office of both Chambers is five years. Both chambers differ in the way they are elected – the Majlisi Namojandagon is elected directly, while the Majlisi Milli, which is a kind of self-government chamber, is elected indirectly. The amendment of the constitution also included guarantees for registration of religious political parties, provided that freedom of expression and religion is guaranteed in their programs and activities. The proposed solutions addressed the demands of the political opposition gathered around religious groups, which, thanks to UN mediation, concluded a peace agreement of June 27, 1997, which ended the civil war. Under the political agreement, the United Opposition of Tajikistan¹⁹, including the main political force – the Islamic Party of the Rebirth of Tajikistan²⁰ gained

¹⁸ A. Bisztyga, D. Wojtczak, *Teoretyczne i komparatystyczne uwagi o trybie zmiany konstytucji i jej preambuły*, [in:] *Dookoła Wojtek... Księga pamiątkowa poświęcona doktorowi Arturowi Wojciechowi Preisnerowi*, eds. R. Balicki, M. Jabłoński, Wrocław 2018, p. 68.

¹⁹ K. Strachota, M. Falkowski, *Dżihad i Nowa Wielka Gra. Paradoksy zagrożenia wojującym islamem w Azji Centralnej*, Warsaw 2010, p. 19, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/punkt_widzenia_21.pdf (9.10.2019).

²⁰ An Islamic political party in Tajikistan. Delegalized in 2015.

access to positions in government administration. The list of changes made in the constitution leads to the conclusion that the amendment has the characteristics of a revision of a constitution. As a reminder, a revision of a constitution must be of fundamental nature. In my opinion, this was the nature of the change in the presidential term (its extension to seven years), the transformation of the unicameral parliament into a bicameral parliament, along with the modification of the powers of both chambers, and the legalization of the activities of religious political groups²¹.

According to the official data, the turnout in the constitutional referendum held on September 26, 1999 was 92.53%. The amendments to the Constitution were supported by 75.31% of the voters. 24.69% of the voters were against the amendments²².

The next stage in the evolution of the constitutional system of the Republic of Tajikistan was the second amendment of the constitution, which was also completed by a nationwide referendum on the adoption of the amendment. The constitutional referendum was initiated for the first time in history by the Tajik bicameral parliament Majlisi Oli and was held on June 22, 2003. The key argument in support of the need to amend the constitution that was used in the parliamentary debate was that after almost 10 years of its existence, the constitution required modification in order to adopt it to the contemporary standards²³. In reality, the objective of the proposed amendment was to strengthen the position of the incumbent president and to allow him to stand as a candidate in the next presidential election by repealing the constitutional provisions that prevented this. In the referendum, the people adopted further amendments modifying the wording of the Article 65 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan. The new wording of the Article 65 of the Constitution allowed for the possibility of electing the President of the Republic of Tajikistan for two terms of seven years each. The referendum also approved the abolition of the age limit of 65 for candidates running for the office of president of Tajikistan. At the same time, the referen-

²¹ A. Pogódek, *Dwuizbowy parlament republiki Tadżykistanu*, "Roczniki Administracji i Prawa Wyższej Szkoły Humanitas w Sosnowcu", vol. XVI, No. 2, p. 21.

²² <https://www.sudd.ch/event.php?lang=en&id=tj011999> (9.10.2019).

²³ <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2003/06/26/focus-constitutional-referendum> (9.10.2019).

dum also approved holding two consecutive presidential elections at the end of the incumbent president's term of office. A draft amendment to the constitution, under which the President of the Republic of Tajikistan would take office from the date of the oath at the joint meeting of the Majlisi Oli, as laid down in the Article 67 of the Constitution, was also accepted. In my opinion, the constitutional changes that were introduced cannot be regarded as revisions of the constitution, because they do not violate the essence of the constitutional system.

According to official data, in the nation-wide referendum, held on June 22, 2003, which approved the amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, the turnout was 96%. The amendments to the Constitution were supported by 92.8% of the voters. 7.2% of the voters were against the amendments²⁴.

The last, third, stage of the evolution of Tajikistan's constitutional system took place on May 22, 2016 and involved another amendment of the constitution. Majlisi Oli submitted a draft of 41 amendments to the constitution, 5 of which were of key importance to the constitutional system and the others were of a linguistic and stylistic nature. Given the scope and fundamental nature of the amendments, the draft should be considered a revision of the constitution of November 6, 1994. This is evidenced in particular by the introduction in Article 1 of the constitution of a norm introducing a presidential form of government. The President of the Republic of Tajikistan was recognized in the constitution as the head of state and of the executive power (government), with the function of prime minister preserved. It is therefore a kind of constitutional phenomenon. The second most important change "traditionally" concerned the Article 65 of the Constitution, which regulates the election of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. In particular, the limitation, introduced in 2013, to two 7-year presidential terms was eliminated. In fact, the adopted provision allows the incumbent president to stay in office for life. A provision was also introduced stating that a candidate for the office of president may be a person who is over 30 years old and who meets other constitutional requirements, which were not changed in this amendment. In practice, Rustam Emomali, who is the eldest son of the current Tajik presi-

²⁴ <http://www.electionguide.org/election.php?ID=366> (9.10.2019).

dent, was given the opportunity to run for president in the 2020 presidential election. At the same time, the age limit for candidates to the republic's parliament was lowered to 30 years. The last of the most important amendments that were adopted modified the Article 8 of the Constitution. The new wording of the article introduced a ban on the establishment and operation of foreign political parties and nationalist and religious parties, and on the financing of political parties by foreign countries, foreign organizations, as well as foreign legal entities and natural persons.

Of note is the fact that in the referendum the voters gave a 'yes' or 'no' answer to one question concerning the adoption of all 41 amendments proposed by Parliament without specifying individual ones²⁵. The result was a boycott of the referendum by the opposition and the refusal of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to send its observers. According to official data, in the nation-wide referendum, held on May 22, 2016, which approved the amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, the turnout was 92%. The amendments to the Constitution were supported by 94.5% of the voters. 3.3% of the voters were against the amendments²⁶. For the first time in the history of referendums in Tajikistan, there were also invalid votes – 2.2%.

The 2016 revision of the Constitution resulted in a wave of criticism, including from the international community. It was emphasized that the changes to the constitution enabled the president to rule practically for life and may lead to the formation of dynastic governments, because a mechanism for the transfer of power through inheritance was created. In this context, the appointment of the President's daughter as the head of the presidential administration was emphasized. It was pointed out that Tajikistan is an authoritarian state dominated by the president and his supporters²⁷. Of course, this did not result in a reversal of the changes in the political system.

²⁵ The question was: "Do you accept the amendments and additions to the country's Constitution?"

²⁶ https://www.bbc.com/russian/news/2016/05/160523_tajikistan_constitution_amendments (9.10.2019).

²⁷ *Отчет о правах человека за 2018 г.*, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29937919.html> (9.10.2019).

IV. Conclusion

During the 25 years of existence of Tajikistan's constitution, the three amendments to the Constitution adopted by the nation in national referendums resulted in major transformations of the constitutional system. The constitutional changes made in 1999 and 2016 had fundamental and far-reaching systemic consequences and can therefore be described as constitutional revisions. In the three stages of the constitutional reforms, the constitutional position of the head of state was significantly strengthened, among others by changing the form of government into a presidential one, extending the term of office of the president to 7 years, abolishing restrictions on the number of the president's terms in office, and limiting political pluralism and consequently banning and practically eliminating the political opposition. The evolution of Tajikistan's constitutional system also included transformation of the unicameral parliament into a bicameral parliament and its subsequent weakening. It should be noted that, under the pretense of improvement and supplementation, the constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan has been extensively changed to comply with the interests of the president and the ruling elite around him. At present, the political situation in the country is stable and the president's power seems to be safe and may last for a very long time. In case of a deterioration in the health of the incumbent President, the transfer of power to his oldest son in the presidential elections in 2020 cannot be ruled out.

In the near future, one should not expect any evolution of the constitutional system in the Republic of Tajikistan toward a system typical of democratic countries. This is due to many factors, including, in particular, the dominant position of the president, the continuing threat posed by terrorist organizations, and the lack of democratic, independence-related, and constitutional traditions. Not without significance is also the impact of the experiences of the Soviet constitutional period, which left its mark on contemporary Tajik constitutionalism.

Of note is the fact that in other Central Asian countries, too, similar political processes are taking place, resulting in a fundamental strengthening of the political position of the head of state. The Republic of Tajikistan is the sixth post-Soviet country, after Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, the Republic of Be-

larus, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, where the limit on the number of terms of office of the head of state has been eliminated. The scale of this phenomenon raises the question of whether it was inevitable and caused more by the lack of democratic traditions or by the passive attitude of the international community. Or perhaps it was due to the influence of the communist ideology according to which “we will never give up power once we have gained it”.

However, a question remains as to the prospects for a change in the constitutional system in this country if the country’s internal situation is exacerbated, the society is radicalized, and religious fundamentalists are returning to power in the neighboring Afghanistan. It cannot be ruled out that such a hypothetical situation may contribute to the restoration of the idea of a revival of the Caliphate – a historical Islamic religious state, which was openly proclaimed during the civil war and had many supporters. Such a situation would result in a further evolution of Tajikistan’s constitutional system, which would certainly result in the rejection of the 1994 Constitution and the adoption of a new one.

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