



President Emomali Rahmon on a wall poster in Dushanbe, 2016.

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# Governing extremism through communities in Tajikistan

by Edward Lemon

**S**ince the country's civil war, which began with rival protests in the center of the capital city Dushanbe turning violent in May 1992, protests have been relatively rare in Tajikistan as the government of Emomali Rahmon has consolidated its control. Yet protests erupted across Tajikistan in late September 2016. Rather than being directed at the government, they targeted opposition groups, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) and Group 24, and their "foreign sympathizers." A silent protest by opposition members at the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw triggered the

counter-protests in Tajikistan. Students in Dushanbe burned a flag containing an effigy of Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the IRPT.

State media highlighted the national scale of the protests, which took place in town centers and university campuses across the country. Villagers in the southern city of Bohtar marched through the streets with signs declaring "No to the Enemies of the Tajik People!" In a statement, teachers in the southern district of Panj affirmed that "We will never allow traitors (*hononi*) to live among us. We condemn them." A student from the Tajik Technical University told state media agency *Khovar* the following:



Students at the Tajik Technical University during the protests in September 2016.

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**Young people are trying to keep the peace, stability and independence [of our country], and mobilize (*sarcham'ona*) people to work in this direction. We will not allow any foreign power (*nerui horiji*) to undermine the independence of our state.<sup>1</sup>**

These protests took on the appearance of being community initiated and led by young people in particular, targeting groups that the government has labelled “extremist.” This incorporation of young people points to an important, if understudied, aspect of counter-extremism in Central Asia: the involvement of young people in government attempts to counter extremism. Much of the literature on extremism in Central Asia has focused on the process by which individuals are radicalized, the threat posed by Islamic extremism and the (in)effectiveness of government responses.<sup>2</sup> A great deal of ink, for example, has been spilt on the 1,900 Tajik citizens who joined the Islamic State or on the handful of terrorist attacks that have occurred in the country.<sup>3</sup>

Yet they make up an estimated 0.02 percent of Tajikistan’s population. What about the remaining 99.98 percent of the Tajik population? How are they represented and shaped by state-led counter-extremism? In this article, I reverse the dominant approach to studying extremism and terrorism in Central Asia. Instead of looking at how the government frames those few citizens who join “extremist” groups, I examine the other subjects of this discourse, the vast majority of young people who do not join “extremist” groups. I look at how the government promotes resilience and loyalty, rather than how it disciplines deviant behavior and disloyalty.

**PUT DIFFERENTLY**, much of the analysis on counter-extremism has focused on what Michel Foucault calls sovereign power and disciplinary power.<sup>4</sup> Sovereign power limits, bans and prevents certain behaviors, in this case, those individuals identified as “extremists,” claiming a monopoly on violence. It is a destructive form of power. Disciplinary power is based on the socially constructed distinction between normal and abnormal. Those who

are abnormal—the homosexual, the vagrant, the extremist—are subject to disciplinary measures to help them conform. But this chapter highlights how counter-extremism also involves the third type of power identified by Foucault: biopower. Whereas disciplinary power regulates the potentially “bad” practices of citizens, biopower promotes certain “good” ways of living to replace these practices. Biopower is “part of a new type of governing for which life is a reservoir that must be tapped into rather than subjected to legal or disciplinary structures.”<sup>5</sup> It is a form of power which focuses on administering, developing, fostering, and securing life. Biopower is not purely enforced from the top down. Instead, it is a “pastoral” form of power. Elites promote certain forms of life, but it is up to subjects themselves to adopt practices which conform to this vision.

Countering extremism, then, is not merely about the destructive acts of banning groups, arresting their followers, and regulating religion with the aim of securing the region’s secular authoritarian regimes. It constitutes a *productive* set of policies that attempt to mold citizens to adopt a secular understanding of Islam, instill them with an appreciation of the “harmonious” and “peaceful” status quo, and encourage them to mobilize to defend the state against threats. Ultimately, the government is seeking to counter extremism through communities themselves, creating subjects who monitor themselves and others for signs of anti-government “extremism.”

Counter-extremism involves the use of the state media to offer guidelines for how citizens should behave in order to contribute to the state’s vision for the development of the secular state. As the above quote from the student from Tajik Technical University demonstrates, discourses on extremism are interlinked with narratives on the nation; they set the anti-Tajik, “foreign,” violent, extremist Other in opposition to the patriotic, loyal, peaceful, Tajik Self. Counter-extremism narratives contain the government’s vision of how politics *should* be: peaceful, harmonious, stable.

## Regime protests in Tajikistan

Inheriting an understanding of the relationship between religion and security from the Soviet Union, the government of Tajikistan has created a dichotomy between “good,” state-controlled, safe, moderate Islam and “bad” unofficial, dangerous, extremist Islam. While Islam has been framed by the regime as a key component of national identity, through schools, the state media, and youth clubs, the Tajik state also promotes and builds a secular (*dunyavi*) national culture, training young people in the “spirit of patriotism” (*rirhiyai vatandirsti*).

Rather than securing itself purely through repressive means, the government is attempting to instill values in its citizens that will inhibit their critical thinking and make them less likely to resist the regime. While state institutions play a central role in this, citizens themselves also share responsibility. Officials repeatedly call on citizens to monitor other community members and to consciously work on themselves. President Emomali Rahmon argues that the responsibility for countering extremism does not solely lie with the government; it also lies with communities:

To raise children in the spirit of patriotism (*ruhiyi vatandusti*), respect for parents, respect national traditions and values, to learn science and knowledge, professions and crafts, to appreciate the independence and freedom of the Motherland and to hold national and religious rituals in accordance with the essence and principles of our democratic and secular state (*davlati demokrati va dunyaviamon*).<sup>6</sup>

Responsible and loyal citizens need to be vigilant (*zirak*) to what is going on around them and resilient to extremist messaging. As the Prosecutor General from Rudaki district states, “it is every citizen’s patriotic duty (*fardi vatandiristi*) to guide the young people toward a democratic society (*demokrativu huquqbunyod hidoyat*), so that they contribute to the stability of their national state.”<sup>7</sup> The Tajik state is not a panopticon; it relies on horizontal surveillance between citizens.

The September 2016 protests highlight some of these dynamics. The protests targeted two opposition groups, both of which the government had labelled extremist. Group 24 was classified by the government as an extremist organization in October 2014 following calls for protests in Dushanbe. Following a long process of marginalization, the IRPT, part of the civil war-era opposition allocated 30 per cent of government posts in the 1997 Peace Accord, was outlawed in August 2015, and declared a terrorist organization after being accused of plotting a coup in September 2015. The state media portrayed the popular response to the September 2016 opposition protests as evidence that this effort to shape public consciousness was working. Protestors reaffirmed the hegemonic narrative, declaring their allegiance to the Tajik state, accusing the opposition of spreading lies and being supported by foreigners. Not only did they publicly conform to the government’s message, they also accepted responsibility for countering extremism. In a joint statement, students at the Tajik National University stated that “Strenuous efforts should be made to instill the values of ‘nation’ (*vatan*), ‘people’ (*millat*) and ‘reconciliation’ (*vahdat*) in every citizen.”<sup>8</sup> And as a teacher stated in an opinion piece published in state newspaper *Jumhuriyat*, this is not only the responsibility of the government: “every citizen (*shahrivan*) is responsible for protecting (*hifzi*) national values and contributing to the strengthening of national unity.”<sup>9</sup>

Although the state media gave the impression that the September 2016 protests were community led, the group behind many of the actions, Avangard, has close links to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Founded in 2015, Avangard’s stated goal, to “prevent the creation of an alien culture, recruitment of young people to different groups of extremists, and to promote increasing respect for the national values of the Tajik people,” reflects the government’s own narrative on extremism.<sup>10</sup> In the summer of 2015, the Ministry paid for the movement’s leaders to travel to Russia and establish links with the migrant community. Mem-

bers of the group meet frequently with officials and have been given electronic tablets as a reward for their work. Avangard’s position as officially non-governmental, yet unofficially governmental, points to the blurred boundary between state and civil society in Tajikistan. Counter-extremism in Tajikistan forms an important component of authoritarian governance; it is inter-linked with relations of power. Through its efforts to counter “extremists,” the regime attempts to secure itself.

## Relations of power and community counter-extremism

To understand what this mobilization of the Tajik population to counter-extremism means for our understanding of governance in Central Asia, I draw on the thinking of French thinker Michel Foucault. Power lies at the core of Foucault’s approach. For Foucault, power “is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than being something that actors possess and wield, according to Foucault, power is a relation between agents. Power, therefore, is decentered and polyvalent, rather than hierarchical. Power is not always destructive; it can be productive too. Foucault was concerned with uncovering how practices of power produce political subjects. In

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his essay “The Subject and Power”, Foucault wrote that his objective in his later work was to examine the way in which human beings turn themselves into subjects.<sup>12</sup>

THROUGH STATE counter-extremism efforts, Tajiks are constituted as political subjects. Although such measures directly target the small minority of opposition activists who have been labelled “extremists,” the main audience of counter-extremism are those members of the population who are not political extremists. The regime attempts to mobilize these people based on the belief that “as patriotic young people (*javononu*), [they] must fight the false interests (*gumrohu manfiathoi*) that oppose (*ziddi*) the Republic of Tajikistan.”<sup>13</sup> Government-led counter-extremism in Tajikistan involves the cultivation of political subjects who simultaneously remain resilient to the messages of opposition “extremists,” while mobilizing to actively support the government. The ideal subject is not totally docile; they are able to separate truth (what the government says) from falsehood (what the opposition says). Political engagement is only permissible insofar as it is directed at supporting the regime.

Interestingly, parallels exist with Soviet attempts to mold political subjects. As Oleg Kharkhordin concludes, the ultimate achievement of Soviet individualization was the creation of a subject who constantly readjusts themselves by holding mini-trials about their deeds.<sup>14</sup> The ideal Tajik subject will uphold national values, condemning those who do not. During the Soviet era, newspapers were filled with stories which claimed to be written

by citizens extolling the benefits of life in the USSR and denouncing religious individuals. After the 1990 riots in Dushanbe, Soviet newspapers were filled with “positive” stories of ordinary citizens going on with their lives, with headlines such as “We will Live!” (Rus.: *Budem Zhit!*) and “No to Extremism!” (*Ekstremizmu Nyet!*).<sup>15</sup> These articles called on people to remain “united” (Rus.: *edini*) and committed to the principles of organized Soviet life: the *kollektiv* and *druzhiba narodov*. Although the language has changed, the form of the discourse in independent Tajikistan bears a striking resemblance to that which came before.

## “Securing” the public

As shown above, countering extremism involves state repression, but it also involves the promotion of certain ways of living *appropriately*. Through counter-extremism, the government is attempting to create citizens who are loyal, who will monitor one another, and who will be unlikely to challenge the regime. Assessing the effectiveness of these measures remains difficult. Are citizens merely performing their loyalty publicly while privately disavowing the regime, or do many of them genuinely support the regime’s counter-extremist policies and participate willingly? Evidence from various studies indicates a mixture of responses from citizens in Tajikistan, ranging from support to acceptance and resistance.<sup>16</sup> It is clear, however, that the state’s attempts to build docile secular subjects can never be fully realized. As Foucault argues, where there is power, there is resistance.<sup>17</sup> ✖

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Note: The text is based on a keynote lecture held at the conference “Soft power: Co-opting post-Soviet youth: Russia, China and Transnational Authoritarianism” at CBEES, Södertörn University, October 28–29, 2021.

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