

By Nargis Zokirova

For the past decade, Tajik experts have been saying that corruption is growing in the country, and that it is causing negative economic and social consequences for the Tajik society. President Emomaly Rakhmon has emphasized many times that democratization is vulnerable because of the growth of corruption.

The Tajik people not only hear about the high level of corruption in the country, but experience it as well. They are reminded daily that offering bribes to officials will get their problems solved. For example, one resident of Dushanbe recently told me that she paid US\$150 to receive passports for her and her son. Officially, the cost to receive a passport is US\$30, but she was willing to pay more to make sure she would receive the passports in three days instead of waiting more than a month. Another example of the day-to-day corruption in Tajikistan is the story of a resident of Khodjent (the administrative center of northern Tajikistan) whose niece came to visit. During her visit, she had an appendicitis attack and needed an operation. When the Khodjent resident brought his niece to the hospital, doctors demanded US\$100 to perform the operation, even though medical services are free in Tajikistan.

Corruption affects every sector and level of authority from the top executive, legislative and judicial authorities down through regional and local structures, according to Abdolvokhid Shamolov, the head of the national strategy department of the president's Strategic Research Center.

Thus, corruption has become the norm for Tajik citizens and businessmen. There is a state corruption phenomenon, in which state officials take bribes and make decisions that are not necessarily their responsibility, according to Shamolov.

The U.S. Department of State's Human Rights Situation Report for 2006 notes that corruption in Tajikistan is prevalent and that bribery and nepotism in particular are causing serious obstacles to democratic reform.

However Sherhon Salimov, director of the Committee on State Finance Control and Fight against Corruption Agency, does not agree. He says corruption exists in the U.S., as well. In a political newspaper printed in May 2007, he questioned why corruption isn't an obstacle to democracy in the U.S., while it is in Tajikistan.

Samilov accepts that corruption exists in Tajikistan, especially after the Civil War (1992-1997). "As a result of the new market relationships for the country after the collapse of the Soviet rule, the new economic attitude was not accepted properly and exactly; this is one of the main reasons for corruption in our society," Salimov said. "There are other reasons as well, including the poverty of population, legislative nihilism and a lack of transparency."

The report, "Corruption in Tajikistan: Public Opinion — 2006" was published in December 2006 by the Tajik president's Strategic Research Center. According to Shamolov, people think that the legal system is the most subject to corruption, and they doubt the ability of the legislation to combat it.

According to the report, 14.9 percent of those surveyed said bribery and paying money to traffic officers to avoid fines are the most common forms of corruption. There also is an increased tendency to use bribery to avoid or reduce taxes, according to the report.

Furthermore, according to Nusratullo Abdulloev, the head of High Court of Tajikistan, more representatives of the legal system were convicted of corruption in the first six months of 2007 than in previous years. Abdulloev said that since the beginning of 2007, 18 former employees of the former State Borders Protection Committee, 16 Ministry of Internal Affairs employees, 15 Ministry of Defense employees, two customs house employees and three representatives of the tax authorities were convicted of corruption. Two employees of the Public Prosecutor's Office have also been convicted. At a press conference in July 2007, Abdulloev said that during the first six months of 2007, there also was an increase in the number of criminal corruption cases in the agriculture, transportation, health, education, construction and executive power spheres.

An analysis by the president's Strategic Research Center shows that more officials and employees in the health and education spheres are engaged in corruption. According to Abdulloev, these are the two fields of employment that have the lowest wages, and employees are finding ways to get additional income.

The research report also noted that when a businessman wants a credit account, he is supposed to give informal payments to different organizations, totaling about US\$3,000 or US\$4,000. Despite the Fight against Corruption Law, Tajik entrepreneurs say they cannot resolve their problems and develop their businesses. They

say the inefficiency of the process is one main reason for the increase of corruption levels.

In 2006, the independent research center Sharq conducted the survey, "The Shadow Economy of Tajikistan." The survey said the shadow economy is more than 60 percent of the official Tajik GDP. The survey's author, Jaffar Olimov, said that 57 percent of commercial firms often or always give informal payments to state officials, and these informal payments are one third of the annual profit of these firms.

On the surface, it appears the government is making strides against corruption. According to Bobojon Bobokhonov, chief prosecutor of Tajikistan, the government investigated 163 corruption cases in the first six months of 2007. Moreover, in the spring of 2007, President Rakhmon created the Committee on State Finance Control and Fight against Corruption, which is designed to strengthen the system for fighting corruption, eliminating duplicate state functions and providing more transparency.

On June 23, 2007, in Dushanbe, Abdurahim Abdukhasanov, the deputy of the new agency, told the discussion club Social Partnership that the State Finance Control and Corruption Struggle Agency started its work on May 15. In that short period, the agency unveiled more than 50 cases of corruption and economic crimes. Among them, 12 are cases of bribery and 25 cases of major embezzlements.

However, Tajik society is skeptical of the government's efforts to create an anti-corruption agency. The Tajik people have two main questions: How transparent will the activity of this new agency be, and how independent will the agency be from the government?

According to independent expert and political scientist Khodji Abduljabor, the creation of the agency shows the growing levels of corruption in the country and the fact that it is a potential threat to the existing political reality. "This (corruption) has become a factor not only destructively affecting the image of the country at both internal and external levels, but also the reliance of the population," Abduljabor said. "Obviously, political will is necessary at the highest levels of authority for this agency to decrease corruption by a considerable extent."

Shamolov said that similar anti-corruption institutions in Kenya and Nigeria unfortunately did not eliminate corruption. "However, there is another vehicle in the

struggle against corruption,” Shamolov said in a March 2007 interview in The Oasis Central Asian magazine. “It is a public/non-governmental agency to battle corruption, created by each government and its president, to implement non-punitive tasks. Such agencies exist in Singapore, Hong Kong and Chile and in almost all European countries. These public organizations have become more effective than the governmental ones,” Shamolov said.

Salimov claims that the agency will develop a national corruption strategy and work on this strategy has already begun at the government-level. According to Salimov, the strategy will define corruption in the country, as well as methods to overcome it and what social, political, economic and legal measures must be undertaken to effectively battle it.

However Abduljabor says that the agency is unable to eliminate the phenomenon of corruption, because of the strengthening of the state system and its corresponding power to govern and control everything, as well as the underdeveloped market economy of Tajikistan.