

By Nargis Zokirova

Corruption in Tajikistan has gone beyond the social level, reaching the political and economic strata. The whole system of executive power is penetrated by corruption, inhibiting the developing economy of Tajikistan.

Bribing is a normal habit in every sector of the governmental departments of Tajikistan. Tajiks are used to giving bribes for everything: to get jobs, enroll in universities and pass exams, to get driver's licenses, to pay taxes, to get passports and so on. That is why Tajikistan was ranked by Transparency International as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

According to Khodjimhammad Umarov, an independent economist, the majority of the Tajik population takes part in corrupt practices. The 2005 report "Corruption in Tajikistan: Public Opinion" was provided by the Tajik president's Strategic Research Center, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the United Nations Development Program. According to this report, ordinary people bribe officials up to three times a year.

Businessmen and entrepreneurs are more prone to giving bribes than any other part of the population. For them, giving bribes is a daily reality. Likewise, anybody who wants to start a business becomes a victim of the corrupt system. The officials must also pay for services or render services in order to see their problems solved. It was said that 34 percent of officials confirmed having paid bribes or rendering services to "necessary people" over the last three years.

Abdulvokhid Shamolov, the head of a task group, claimed that "corruption in Tajikistan leads to political discredit of the state authority." Legal institutions, judicial authority, health and education authorities, tax and custom services, trade and transport are all polluted by internal corruption. Bribery (65 percent), nepotism (25 percent), subornation of officials (15 percent), machinations with the state property (10 percent), blackmail from officials (15 percent) and bribery of universities teachers and physicians (30 percent) are the most prevalent types of corruption in Tajikistan, according to the above-mentioned report. By respondents' opinions, bribery as a main type of corruption is narrowly connected with nepotism and machinations with the state property.

Over the last six months, Tajik mass media have revealed 120 corruption crimes, which were then referred to Abdurasul Kholmurodov, the head of the Anti-Corruption Department of the D.A.'s office. Sixty-five criminal cases involving 82 Tajik citizens were opened. The loss to the state budget is US\$134,000. Kholmurodov said that the quantity of identified crimes increased many times in comparison with the previous year. The largest number of corruption cases was in health and education.

Umarov, the economist who studies corruption, noted that the struggle against corruption takes place only in schools, universities and hospitals in Tajikistan. The entrenched high-level officials, with access to large sums from the state treasury available for payoffs, remain above the law. "This is clear," Umarov said. "The high-level official holds power and has money. He can bribe any investigator. In

the case of teachers, they have to take bribes because it is very difficult to manage with (US)\$30 to (US)\$40 a month.”

Mahmadali Vatanov, first deputy of the Supreme Court, said judges on the Tajik Supreme Court earned an average of US\$300 a month, while lower-level judges earn up to US\$150 a month. Meanwhile, a minimal monthly wage is about US\$7.50. Despite their high salaries, some judges have been found taking bribes. One corrupt judge was recently brought to justice, receiving a sentence of five years in prison.

Some experts say the high level of corruption in Tajikistan discourages foreign investment, a problem also recognized by Tajik authorities. They are aware that Tajikistan, with external debts of US\$828 million, cannot manage without foreign investment.

“Investors are sure to succeed, if equal conditions are available to them,” said Richard Hoagland, U.S. ambassador to Tajikistan from 2003 to August 2006, speaking at a meeting with journalists in July 2006. “Transparency and law enforcement give confidence to the American investors, but corruption and official circumlocution can frighten away them,” Hoagland added.

Tajikistan has a good chance of becoming a member of the World Trade Organization during the coming two to three years, said Sobir Kurbanov of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation’s office in Tajikistan. He said that to join the WTO, Tajikistan will need to fight down corruption, observe and fulfill the laws of foreign commerce and have stronger state management and better prepared specialists.

Abdulvohid Shamolov, head of the Strategic Research Center’s “Corruption in Tajikistan: Public Opinion” report, said the converse also is true: that any further rise of corruption can lead the country to political and economic isolation, complicating its internal political situation.

Muso Asozoda, the head of personnel of the National Democratic Party of Tajikistan, said corruption as a pernicious phenomenon takes place not only in Tajikistan, but in industrialized countries as well. According to Asozoda, the high level of corruption is linked with consequences of the Tajik Civil War, which took place between 1992 and 1997.

Shokirdjon Khakimov, first deputy of Social Democratic Party, said the most common form of corruption in Tajikistan is nepotism, especially among high-powered authorities. “A group of President (Emomali) Rahmonov’s compatriots from the south still run us. They came to power in the beginning of the Civil War and still influence the condition and levels of corruption,” Khakimov said.

That assessment is backed by a 2005 report by Brussels-based Crisis International Group, which stated that “the president surrounded himself with people originating from his region.” One of the report’s conclusions is that these people block the struggle against corruption in Tajikistan.

In Umarov's opinion, it is impossible to control corruption in the country. "I believe that the authorities are guilty of creating this kind of situation, because until recently the Tajik government denied the presence of corruption amongst officials," he said. "The amazing fact is that the first to speak about the existence of corruption in Tajikistan were the international organizations, which were not accredited here. After initially denying these facts, the Tajik officials had to finally acknowledge them and recognize the presence of corruption in the country."

However, Rahmonov himself pays special attention to fighting corruption, issuing several key legislative statements since 1999. Among them are "President's Decree about Additional Steps to Strengthen the Fight against Economic Crimes and Corruption," "Law about Fighting Corruption," "Law about State Service." The president created the Office for Fighting Corruption in 2004 to extirpate this pernicious phenomenon.

Saifullo Safarov, head of the presidential Strategic Research Center, said the president has chosen a two-pronged approach to fight corruption: by accepting the new laws and by public opinion. "Repressive measures, which are common in many countries in their fight against corruption, do not give the expected results. This is the same as struggling with alcoholism," Safarov said. He believes that "freedom of speech and independent mass media can effectively fight corruption. The development of these two institutions can lead to the increase of responsibility in all levels of society, from officials to common citizens."