

Social Media as an Alternative to Public Opinion Polls: Gauging Political Preferences in Tajikistan in the Run-up to 2013

Presidential Elections by Alexander Sodiqov

On November 6 Tajik citizens will go to the polls in the Presidential election. With the only genuine opposition candidate Oinihol Bobonazarova being forced out of the race in October, the incumbent Emomali Rahmon is widely expected to win another term. Despite the election being seen as a foregone conclusion by many, a relatively lively debate on the state of politics in Tajikistan has developed online

The most commonly used method for gauging public opinion in societies is the polling of voting-age citizens. This textbook tool, however, is often denied to analysts of countries such as Tajikistan where governments are suspicious of polls, infrastructure for extensive polling of public opinion is lacking, and the rare polls that are conducted often return suspiciously nonsensical results. This brief article suggests that social media presents an alternative indicator of public opinion in societies such as Tajikistan's. The article outlines the predominant contours of the social media discussion of the November 6, 2013 presidential elections in the country, illustrating what an analysis of social media can add to our understanding of public opinion in places where pre-election polls are not an option.

Do Social media matter?

There are obviously major limits to treating online activity as a reliable gauge of the offline political preferences and behavior of the Tajikistani public. First, the predominantly urban-based, middle-class, well-educated, and computer-literate users of social media, some of whom live abroad, are not necessarily representative of the country's population as a whole. Second, while it is possible to count and interpret texts and multimedia content shared on social media, it is virtually impossible to measure the opinion of a broader audience of users who observe the discussion without participating in it. Third, the data collected by analyzing social media is rendered somewhat unreliable by the fact that users are more likely to discuss something with which they disagree rather than something they agree with. Fourth, the range of opinions represented in social media might be limited due to self-censorship as the intensification of government efforts to monitor online activity prompting some users to become more cautious in what they write and how they comment. Fifth, even when internet users discuss political topics, join groups, or share certain texts or images, this does not always accurately predict their actual offline behavior. Finally, there is the problem of a selection bias introduced by the fact that (a) some posts and comments on popular social media platforms and news forums are moderated, and (b) analysts are necessarily constrained by the amount of text they can access, and they are often biased as to which bits of online discussion they deem worth looking at.

Yet, even if social media is an imperfect indicator of public opinion, it is probably the best indicator available in a country like Tajikistan. Social media is the only place where a meaningful, broad-based discussion of the November 2013 presidential election is taking place. With less than three weeks left before the presidential vote at the time of writing, there were few signs of an electoral competition or discussion of political alternatives taking place in Tajikistan. State-run television, which remains the key source of political information for most people in the country, did not change its programming nor allot airtime to

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anyone except the incumbent president. Local radio stations largely disregarded the elections. There was a good deal of election-related discussion in newspapers, but the readership of Tajikistani newspapers is significantly smaller than the users of social media. Besides, many of newspaper articles reached a wider audience when they were shared via social media.

“The distance between an ‘average’ social media user and an ‘average’ citizen is narrowing in Tajikistan”

In addition, the distance between an “average” social media user and an “average” citizen is narrowing in Tajikistan. While estimates of the number of internet users in the country differ¹, there is little doubt that the percentage of individuals using the internet relative to the general population has increased.² The number of Tajikistani bloggers and users of social networks has been on the rise, while the amount of political discussion on these platforms as well as on news forums has noticeably increased. Hence, social media users are increasingly more representative of the general public in Tajikistan.

The Coverage of the Upcoming Elections in Social Media

The following brief description of the political preferences of Tajikistani social media users is based on the author’s observation of online activity which occurred on two most popular social-networking platforms in the country (Facebook and Odnoklassniki), a small group of blogs and Twitter accounts run by Tajikistanis, and in the comments sections of two popular news websites which offer independent political reporting (news.tj, ozodi.org). The observation spans the period between August 1, 2013, and October 15, 2013. Slightly more than half of all posts and comments explored were in Russian, with the rest being in Tajik.

There was almost no discussion of the upcoming presidential vote in the social media in August, apart from several Facebook users sharing images of Muhiddin Kabiri and Rahmatillo Zoirov, the leaders of the opposition Islamic Revival Party (IRPT) and Social-Democratic Party (SPT) respectively, and suggesting that they would make good presidents. It became evident by early August that Russia-based Tajikistani opposition movements, Group-24 and Vatandor, or their sympathizers in the country were controlling “Platforma”, at that time largest and most popular Facebook group dedicated to discussing politics in Tajikistan. Discussion in the group became noticeably skewed in favor of posts and memes heavily criticizing the government of President Emomali Rahmon, while praising Umarali Quvvatov, the leader of Group-24 detained by the United Arab Emirates on an extradition request issued by Tajikistan, and Zaid Saidov, a former industry minister arrested in Dushanbe on a number of charges shortly after founding a new opposition party. Several active members of the group left “Platforma” after complaining publicly that the moderators were managing the discussion on the page, refusing to publish some posts and deleting others. Group-24 also came to dominate the political discussion among Tajikistani groups on Odnoklassniki, where comments and political memes identical to those on “Platforma” were posted. Despite the heavy presence of texts and images sympathetic to Russia-based opposition movements, it appeared that these groups had much less genuine support in Tajikistan than they wanted people to believe. Most of these texts and images were posted, shared, and discussed by a small group of users with uncommon names and strange profile pictures, which indicates that there was little genuine interest in or support for these opposition movements among Tajikistani social media users.

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The overall mood amongst online users in August was that the outcome of the elections was foretold. Few users even entertained the possibility of the incumbent’s defeat at the polls. The amount of attention paid to elections began to rise in late August, following reports that a coalition consisting of the two main opposition parties, IRPT and SPT, was negotiating a



«Извинений проси у народа»

«Муаллима, я так больше не буду. Извините, простите.»

In the photo, Bobonazarova tells Rahmon, “Ask the people to forgive you”. Rahmon answers, “Teacher, I will not behave like that again. I am sorry, I apologize”. Image uploaded by ‘Moderator Platformy’ Photos are from the group “Platforma:” <https://www.facebook.com/groups/platformatj/>

unity candidate who could challenge Emomali Rahmon at the polls. The surprise announcement on September 9 that the coalition group had nominated Oinikhol Bobonazarova, a female human rights activist, as their unity candidate became a major hit with the social media.

The buzz generated by the announcement could be divided into three main strands of discussion. One strand centered on the argument about whether Bobonazarova’s nomination was a sign of the weakness of political opposition in Tajikistan or a smart strategy on their part. The second discussion focused on whether voters in Tajikistan

would support a female candidate.³ The third strand of the debate centered on the political aptitude of the incumbent president, with some users ridiculing him and the way his government was administering the elections⁴ while others argued that he was a better option than the other possible contenders.⁵ These conversations, using both texts and images, dominated political discussion in social media through most of September and the first days of October.

The second major albeit less intensive buzz in the social media was sparked by Bobonazarova’s October 11 announcement that she was pulling out of the presidential contest after failing to collect the required amount of signatures in support of her candidacy. Although few users believed that she could have made a serious challenge to Rahmon’s re-election bid, many seemed genuinely disappointed by Bobonazarova’s departure from the race.⁶ The general mood among the users was that the contest had become much “less interesting” without Bobonazarova who had harshly criticized Rahmon and his government.⁷ On Facebook and Odnoklassniki, some members called for a boycott of the November 6 vote,⁸ although it appeared that these calls came predominantly from the same individuals who supported Quvvatov and other Tajikistani opposition leaders in exile. Several days after Bobonazarova had pulled out of the presidential contest the amount of elections-related discussion in social media began to fade.

Overall, during the period under observation, Rahmon and Bobonazarova were the only presidential candidates who drew the attention of social media users. Following Bobonazarova’s departure from the race, Rahmon remained the only candidate in the online political landscape. Out of the remaining five candidates registered by the election authorities, only the candidate from the Socialist Party (SPT) drew some attention from Tajikistani social media users, primarily as a target of mockery. The complete absence online of the five presidential hopefuls running against Rahmon indicates how little the public in Tajikistan knows about these candidates or takes them seriously.

Кандидат в президенты
 Абдухалим Гаффоров,
 председатель Социалистической
 партии Таджикистана

**наш лозунг:
 Голосуйте ЗА
 РАХМОНА!**

“Presidential candidate Abduhalim Gafforov, head of the Socialist Party of Tajikistan”. He is portrayed as saying: “Our motto is: Vote for Rahmon!”. Image uploaded by ‘Umniy Biznes’.

Conclusion

This analysis of the election-related discussion that took place during the three months running up to the November 2013 presidential vote in Tajikistan leads me to several conclusions. First, the public in Tajikistan has little doubt that President Emomali Rahmon will win the elections, and there appears to be genuine support for him among some voters. Second, Oinikhol Bobonazarova, who drew considerable attention and support in Tajikistan, was the only presidential hopeful whose bid to challenge the incumbent leader. Third, Bobonazarova's departure from the race essentially made Rahmon the only player in the elections game, as the public had little knowledge of the other five candidates.

Fourth, Tajikistani opposition movements in exile have recently increased their profile in the social media in an apparent attempt to mobilize support from among young adults critical of Rahmon's government. These movements, however, still lack broad-based backing in the country. This analysis provides the most accurate picture of public opinion in Tajikistan in the run-up to the presidential vote. Although there are still issues with treating social media as a reliable indicator of public opinion, it is arguably the most accurate indicator in a country like Tajikistan.



¹ The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimates the number of internet users in Tajikistan to be 14.5% in 2012, while the national authorities report that more than 3.7 million people used the internet in August 2013. There are major methodological differences between these estimates. Perhaps a more accurate estimate is offered by “Zerkalo” which puts the percentage of individuals accessing internet at home, at work, via internet cafes, and on their mobile devices at 32.6%, and the percentage of people using internet at least three to five times a week at 24%. These estimates are based on a nationwide survey conducted in September-October 2013.

² Zerkalo. *Internet v Tadjikistane: uzhe ne zima, no eshche ne leto* [Internet in Tajikistan: Neither Winter Nor Summer]. Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Zerkalo, Centre for Sociological Research, October 2013.

³ Sodiqov, A. “A Woman Can Only Become President When Men Die Out in Tajikistan”. *Global Voices Online*, September 20, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/09/20/woman-can-become-president-only-when-men-die-out-in-tajikistan/>

⁴ Sodiqov, A. “With Outcome Foretold, Tajik Elections Spark Online Ridicule”. *Global Voices Online*, September 25, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/09/25/with-outcome-foretold-tajik-elections-spark-online-ridicule/>

⁵ Sodiqov, A. “Tajik President's Reelection Bid Finds Support Online”. *Global Voices Online*, September 27, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/09/27/tajik-presidents-reelection-bid-finds-support-online/>

⁶ Sodiqov, A. “Politics is a Men-Only Game: Female Candidate Quits Presidential Race in Tajikistan”. *Global Voices Online*, October 11, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/10/11/politics-is-a-men-only-game-female-candidate-quits-presidential-race-in-tajikistan/>

⁷ Author's correspondence with 6 active Facebook users, 4 Twitter users, and 4 bloggers, October 12-17, 2013.

⁸ Sodiqov, A. “Politics is a Men-Only Game: Female Candidate Quits Presidential Race in Tajikistan”. *Global Voices Online*, October 11, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/10/11/politics-is-a-men-only-game-female-candidate-quits-presidential-race-in-tajikistan/>

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