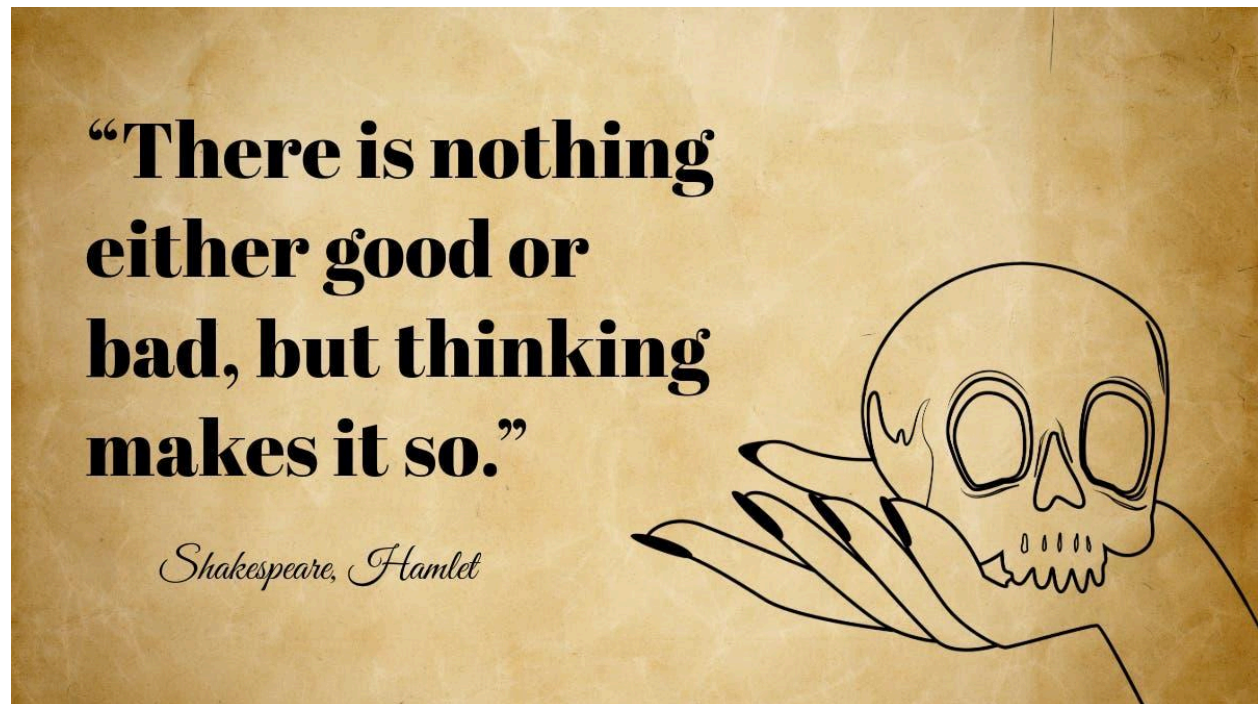


BLOG POST 1

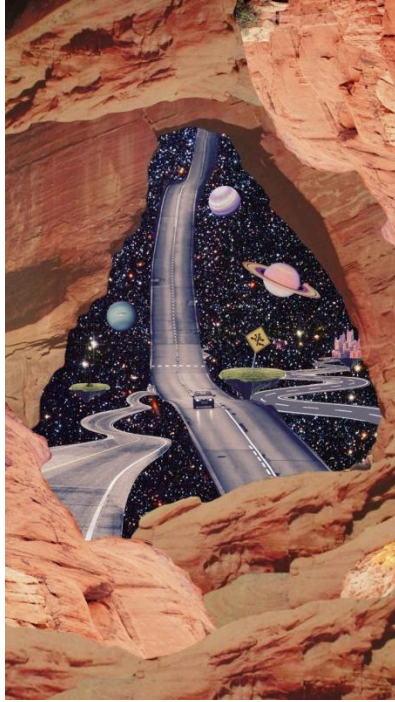
The Power of Perception

The phrase *"To be, or not to be"* from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* comes to mind when contemplating both sides to a deeply nuanced topic. In this case, however, it is not about the existential rumination over life and death. *"To be or not to be"* comes to mind when thinking about Central Asia and how it's categorization effects the perception of it.



NUANCE IN EXISTENCE

At the simplest level, we know as human beings that perspective affects so many aspects of our lives. Perspective is ever-changing, and as feeble and morally flawed as it is, society does allow their perception of people, places, and things affect how they interact with them. Different versions of us all exist across all the brains of everyone we have ever interacted with. This changes with your environment (work, school, home, etc.), and may leave you wondering which version of you that you are *told* by society you are, *actually aligns* with the truth of your being.



Take this same exact thought, and apply it to a different scenario.

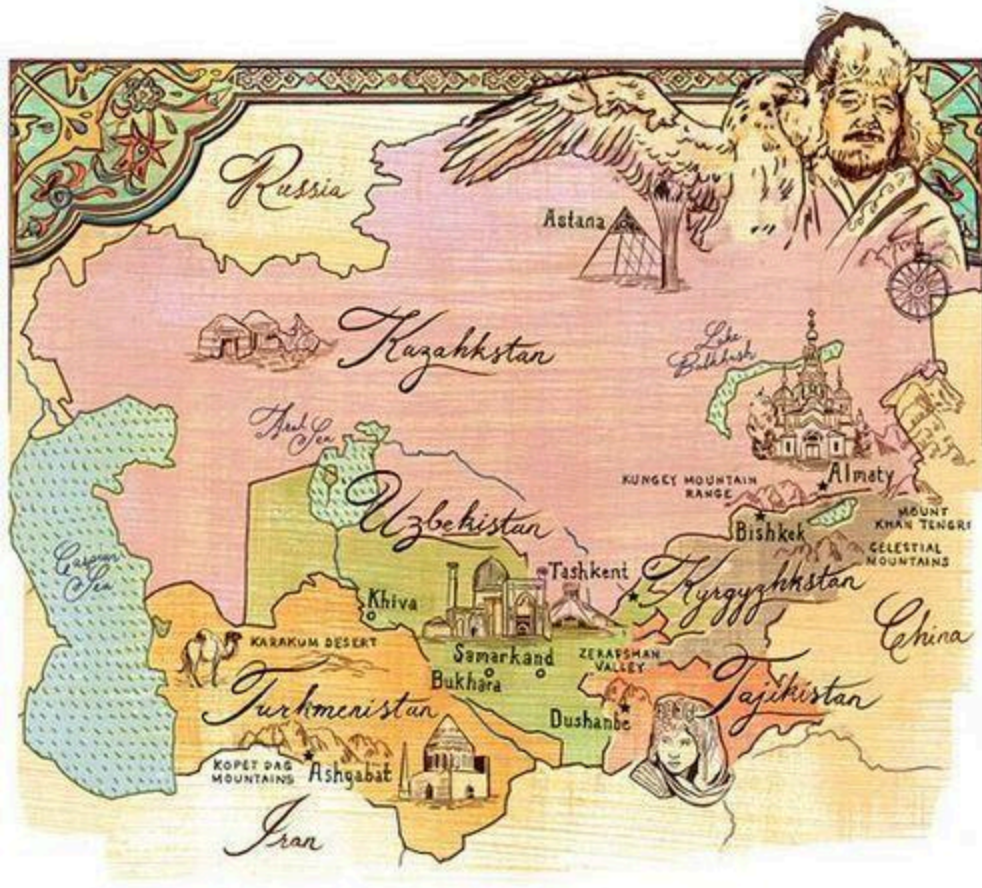
Central Asia and how its mere existence is viewed. There are opposing thoughts, imaginaries, labels, and assumptions to be considered when trying to get a well rounded idea of what to make of the area,

Central Asia is viewed from so many different perspectives, so vast, that it is valid to ponder which version of Central Asia *actually aligns* with the truth of its existence. It could be that the blend of perspectives and open-mindedness may lead us closer to a straightforward definition, but all in all, the region must be viewed for all that it is at once. Ever-changing and complex.

STANDING AS A REGION

Central Asia and the critique of it's "*Asian-ness*" as mentioned in the reading is a topic that may seem simple at a shallow first-glance, but proves itself to be more complex when ruminated over (Diener, Megoran 11). As we mentioned before, perspective varies to fit the eye of the beholder. This is the case when it comes to considering Central Asia's standing as a region. Central Asia is said to be named after it's subjective spatial spot, rather than just being given a name alone. It is said that "large regions that dominate current global maps are not permanent geographical facts but problematic categories for the study of varied geographic and cultural processes", expanding on the idea presented that "it is not that Central Asia is a problem because we cannot easily identify which region it is in; rather, it is that Central Asia provides an exemplary study of why the very concept of regions itself is problematic" (Diener, Megoran 37).

Zoom in....



Zoom out a bit...



A bit more....



Perspective.

Spatially, Central Asia is CENTERED between the other regions; demonstrating the *literalness* of the name.

With this literal placement and the history of the region, there is the idea that Central Asia is a geographic imaginary. In addition to this, some of the terms used when discussing what it is to be imagined as are “post-Soviet, part of the greater Middle East, Inner Asian, Middle Asia, Central Eurasian, Eurasian, the Caucasus” (Diener, Megoran 36). In a way, each term tells a bit about the roots of Central Asia. It has connections to all those around it (Europe, South Asia, Southwest Asia, and East Asia), with each connection making up a percentage of the identity of the region itself. In more detail, “There is a “Central Asia” that we discuss in geographical and geopolitical terms, but as with all places it is a constructed and more fluid concept than is often assumed” (Diener, Megoran 1).

HONORABLE MENTION: TRADE

The fluidity and connections are a great player in one of the biggest factors Central Asia can be recognized for; trade. It is at the heart of everything, meaning that trade is a big part of its stance on the international stage. Often referred to as the “Silk Road” as one of many geographical imaginaries, it is a big hotspot for the good and bad that comes with the trade system.

THE EFFECT

To preface, perceptions would not matter if perceptions did not turn into action and affect the way people, places, and things are treated and interacted with. The implications of seeing Central Asia this way are the stigma birthed from forming these perceptions and the aftermath that may be tied to the perceptions, whether they be negative or positive. That is to say, that a negative perception can have quite a negative effect on a region and a region’s reputation, and that is important because it affects the region’s people, trade, economy, safety, resources, and aid. A negative one could worsen these factors, and a positive one could better them. It is harmful to allow perceptions of a region be seen as the truth of a region, when in reality, it should be taken in as it is and as you hopefully would another human being: complex, layered, and ever-fluid.

IMAGE LINKS

1:

https://www.adobe.com/uk/express/learn/blog/media_1aecb4c25a0d86106f7a1fbb65b61f052754db76c.png?width=1200&format=pjpg&optimize=medium

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5:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/88/Central_Asia_%28orthographic_projection%29.svg/800px-Central_Asia_%28orthographic_projection%29.svg.png

BLOG POST 2

Religion, Interrupted.

As Helen was the face that launched a thousand ships, religion is the topic that raises a thousand questions.



A question that I find worthy of raising is that of how religion can exist without the interference of power dynamics in Central Asia? In addition, I'd claim that power dynamics in religion defy its very purpose.

Yin & Yang

Since the dawn of time, many intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts came to be throughout various parts of the world. Whether it be fighting over which religion is best for humanity, who should be able to inhabit religious territory, which religious group should hold power, which God(s) and Goddesses are legit, or how truthful or untruthful the religious history is behind the religion, there are so many endless existential arguments to be had. The topic of religion has had generations in a chokehold, as we wonder how the concept of belief present within it could be something so powerful. Blood has been shed, think pieces have been typed, and we are nowhere even near close to a finite answer or solution to make it all stop.

We must remember though, where there is yin, there is also yang.



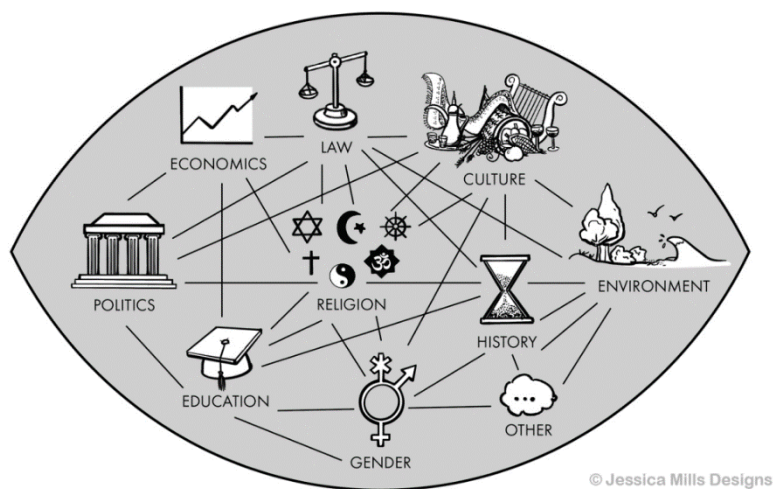
Religion has also been known to provide solace to people innately, and to form communities. We've heard the stories of near-death experiences and people who lean on their faith as a guide to life, or as a safety net for people to fall back on. It can be a place of shelter, and in the most extreme of cases: escapism. There are strong ties between religion and culture, and different levels of prevalence depending on which part of the globe you look at. It is hard at times to find history that is not intermingled with a certain religion or religions, and often belief and superstition is a common theme in many stories told over time to carry out the location's legacy to the future generations.

Power & Control

In Chapter 7 of Borbieva's *The Ascendancy of Orthodoxy, in Islam, Society and Politics in Central Asia*, the idea that "Religion is a culturally constructed category shaped by power" is presented. This could be interpreted as: although people use it for good and bad alike, its origin lies in the push and pull of power and control. As Central Asia changed over time, so did views on religion. Certain views on religion from the Soviet era were kept alive and replicated, and the intersection between politics and religion were shaped by elites and those in positions of power. The state's involvement with religion involved rules on mosque, anti-religion policies, rules on owning properties and media coverage. There is a good amount of contradiction between religion itself, and the rules and ideas set around religion for the sake of power.

The most practiced religion in Central Asia currently is Islam. Media coverage has a huge effect, so if there is positive media coverage about Islam, and/or negative media coverage about Islam, it will set the tone for the treatment that those who practice it may receive. In Kyrgyzstan, it is said there is authenticity in the practice, but there is the worry that outside influence may try to find ways to change it or exploit it at a time of weakness and strip it of that authenticity. This situation, I presume, may serve as an example as to what Borbieva was trying to illustrate.

Religion is always a component in social life, simultaneously offering people purpose and connections. This can be positive and negative for varying reasons. When purpose and connections are rooted in religion, it can be easy for them to turn into a means for external validation in a society. Something that is meant to be so internal and introspective can turn into a matter of who is performing it best, and when it is built upon that foundation, it is easy to destroy. Elitist and/or government figures from within can then use that shaky foundation to sway people in one way or another with ideas of what is correct and what is incorrect for the higher purpose of carrying out an agenda in the same way that global influences can exploit vulnerabilities from the outside in.



Mood & Effect

In Case VI-A of *Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding*, Schwab explores the soviet and post-soviet era, the anti-Islamic atmosphere, and the removal of Islam through multiple avenues. This takes us a step further into this idea of religion being a power play yet invokes sonder by taking us through the nostalgia that came with it. There was a focus on community, traditions, and practices that people would take part in to lift one another's spirits up. The different moods and perspectives reflect the effects of the current situation on people on a personal level. Religion in the context of being something used to bring the community together as opposed to religion in the context of being a tool used to persuade people into submission or punishment seem to be two completely different things. The case really highlights the potential reality of one existing without the other, while in the same light emphasizing the difficult effects that come about when power dynamics and religion intertwine, and the real people affected by it.



Conclusion

There is no quick fix to something as complex as religious issues. It would also be silly to say that power dynamics do not exist beyond religion. It could be said that everything we participate in (job, school, etc.) across the world in our various societies do involve power dynamics as well, hence, they are inescapable. The existence of power dynamics through the state contradicts the existence of religion because religion is ideally meant to advance the practicing individual's experience and the community's experience. When used as a tool to invoke fear in that same community, it cancels out. Hopefully one day, there can be a straightforward answer as to how religion could exist in this way.

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BLOG POST 3

Dance: Power & Control

Intimidation is a key factor in the dance of power and control. Fear is an effective demoralizer. If those in power are able to use intimidation to cause fear, they can take control of the dance, step on the toes of their dance partner, and make them an opponent. One of the issues with authoritarianism is that the people who are meant to be the partners of the government, are made into opponents, if not pawns.

For this post, the focus will be on the extremely aesthetically pleasing & mountainous state of Tajikistan,



and how authoritarianism lays underneath its democracy.

BACKGROUND



A simple Google search tells you that “Tajikistan is a presidential republic in which the president acts as both the head of state and the head of government.”, emphasizing the power held by whoever fills that position. Currently, Emomali Rahmon is the president. His presidency dates all the way back to 1994. How? In Tajikistan, the post-Soviet civil war was the cause for a slew of hardships. Casualties and displacement hit civilians throughout the 1990’s and Emomali Rahmon ascended to power afterwards. With the UTO (United Tajik Opposition) serving as an opposing force during this period, the civil war made way for complex enduring regional clan rivalries, religious and ethnic tensions (fast forward: Islam & Extremism in the 2010s), and a struggle between a post-Soviet autocracy and a diverse coalition of opposition groups. The Tajik Constitution faced changes, making it possible for him to make it from head of state in 1992 to president in 1994. Rahmon was seen as an accidental leader.

DISGUISES



Like many governments in the region, Tajikistan's government claims democracy, yet acts on authoritarianism. Why is this? Well, one of the benefits of promoting yourself as a democracy is that you can remain in good standing on the international stage. If you actively and transparently tell others about your plan to carry out unethical practices and ignore the will of your people, it is logical to believe that they may find a way to stop you, intervene, or stop supporting you. By saying what needs to be said and hiding under the guise of a fair democracy, you can continue to mishandle power with less interference while simultaneously keeping funds and support from international powers. Great for the government, rough for the people. Corruption does not compromise with the truth.

I. THE GOVERNMENT: EXPLAINED

How can this corruption be carried out? One of the ways is through keeping rulers in power despite the elections or the people involved. (Think Turkmenistan's "President for Life: Saparmurat Niyazov). Rulers can hold on to power for a long time and the elites are in a position of enough power in which swaying things however they need can be done smoothly and can be done to their benefit. In Tajikistan, Rahmon has ruled for 5 terms.

Stemming from this is the lack of significance with checks and balances. Lack of the judiciary branch, legislative branch, and executive branch being able to check one another in the way they are meant to. The executive branch holds a considerably large amount of power in comparison to other branches, and is likely to be able to pass whatever they see fit. The tension surrounding Islam & Extremism in the 2010s can serve as an example for authoritarian governance as it is "interlinked with relations of power" (CAC 597). Political interference or even filling spots with those who are likely to comply and who hold personal loyalties is not out of the question. If we hone in and even look at things on a local government level, we can see that governance is done through informal channels and the local government doesn't have much autonomy.

II. THE GOVERNMENT: STRUCTURE

A breakdown of the legal system, economy, and international cooperation as per the EAG (Eurasian Group) is as follows:

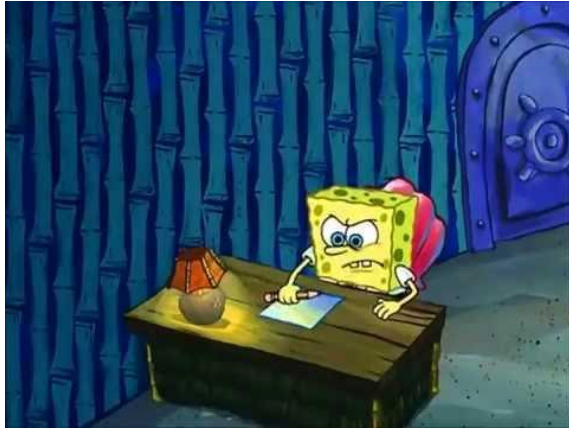
The legal system: "The Constitution is the main law of the State, it was adopted on November 6, 1994. The Majlisi Oli – Parliament of Tajikistan – is the highest representative and legislative body, consisting of two Majlisi – Majlisi Milli (Upper Chamber) and Majlisi Namoyandagon (Lower Chamber)."

The economy: "Tajikistan is an agro-industrial country, where the structure of employment has significantly changed during the years of independence, and the economy industrialization has taken place. The National Development Strategy until 2030 is being actively implemented and industrial production is being developed. Financial sector is represented by banks, micro-credit and micro-deposit organizations, micro-credit funds, insurance companies, professional securities market participants and leasing companies."

"State structures are weak, and the economy has transitioned poorly out of the former Soviet planned economy" (Nekbakhtshoev & Babu 2).

International cooperation: “Tajikistan is among the States that established the EAG and since the foundation of the Group takes an active part in its work. Tajikistan has been a UN member state since 1992, and it is a [SCO](#), [CSTO](#), [IME](#), and [CIS](#) member state.”

CENSORSHIP



“Understanding what type of government Tajiks want demands that we listen to ordinary people” (Collins 215).

The final tool used to exercise authoritarianism under the guise of democracy, and perhaps the one easiest to understand/resonate with is censorship. Monitored internet use and censorship of speech, especially that of which critiques the government is quite prominent. Control of the media makes it so that the narrative being pushed out is as favorable as possible. It allows the government to maintain a democratic façade to those on the outside looking in, and hopefully influence people from the inside to think favorably as well. However, censorship typically elicits the opposite response as suspicion grows, and in this case: the truth is obvious.

Many journalists have been locked up or fined for covering the government in a “distasteful” way. This summer, journalist Ahmad Ibrohim who works as chief editor of the independent weekly newspaper-*Payk*, was arrested on bribery charges by the government for what was described as “critical journalism”. It is said that “the arrest of Ahmad Ibrohim is yet another reminder of how dangerous any form of critical journalism is in the country’s deeply repressive media environment”, and that there are seven other journalist locked up for their work that the Committee to Protect Journalists advocates for (CPJ 2024).

CONCLUSION

I presumed multiple times throughout this blog that it is not far-fetched to say authoritarianism is looked down upon. What makes it worse is when those exercising it attempt for it to be hidden to save face. Many surveys, articles, and news reports have been swayed or silenced out of fear of consequences. The legal system has been corrupted to favor those currently holding executive powers, and thus making the road to change as muddy and difficult as ever. Without honest input and critique from the people living in a state, there is no way the government can really see how to better their rule and adapt in a way that

will be of benefit to all involved. Such a beautiful state should be under an equally beautiful government: one that can acknowledge its positives while being open to hearing its faults. One that enacts change to strengthen the heart that keeps its own body alive: the people.

Image Sources:

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External Sources:

EAG Source: <https://eurasiangroup.org/en/respublika-tadzhikistan>

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BLOG POST 4

Dance: Power & Control Pt. II

Introduction

In part one of this exploration on power dynamics and government in Tajikistan, we concluded by recognizing the people that make up the population as the heart of the nation. Without the people, a nation has nothing. Even in terms of power and control, if the person or group aiming to exert power has nothing/no one to exert it on, that power doesn't exist. We saw this through Islam & Extremism being

“interlinked with relations of power” (CAC 597). This proves power to be a faulty measure of what makes a human being more human than other humans. Despite all of us being caught up in a world full of unnecessary hierarchies and false competition, no human being is above another human being. A corrupt government cannot be depended upon to lead a sound nation, and much less to not abuse the amount of power it holds. Naturally, it is safe to assume that none of what was just said in this paragraph about the importance of each human being matters to the government of Tajikistan. There is injustice all over the world, and there is injustice here. There is so much malpractice going on “underground” yet in plain sight, and it shows no mercy for the people. One major pipe of malpractice that helps the sewage system of injustice continue to flow is none other than the prison system.

Arrest



It starts with *arrest*. Arbitrary arrest, to be specific. Detainment without due process or evidence that a crime was even committed. In many ways, the law does not support its citizens. Many unethical practices are not prohibited by law, and if they are, ways are found around it. For example, the story of Zulfikar Odinaev who was released from a temporary detention center in Hissor after spending 15 days there on charges of “hooliganism,” was subject to a case where “no formal charges were brought against him, he was not provided with a lawyer, and he was banned from speaking to the media while in detention” (Tajikistan Human Rights Report 2021). There are citizens in Tajikistan that were not made aware of their ability to appeal an arrest, and who fall victim to arbitrary arrest or detention without a proper way to fight back or defend their case.

It is reported that “The government generally provided a rationale for arrests, but detainees and civil society groups frequently reported that authorities falsified charges or inflated minor incidents to make politically motivated arrests. According to Human Rights Watch, the country has arbitrarily detained and imprisoned more than 150 individuals on politically motivated charges since 2015. The Minister of Internal Affairs reported that 143 individuals were arrested in the first six months of the year on charges of membership in banned, terrorist, or extremist organizations. According to the ministry, 23 of those arrested are members of opposition-affiliated organizations such as Group 24, IRPT, and the National Alliance of Tajikistan.” (Tajikistan Human Rights Report 2021).

With a system like this, there is a very low chance for a person to see a happy ending once arrested.

Trial



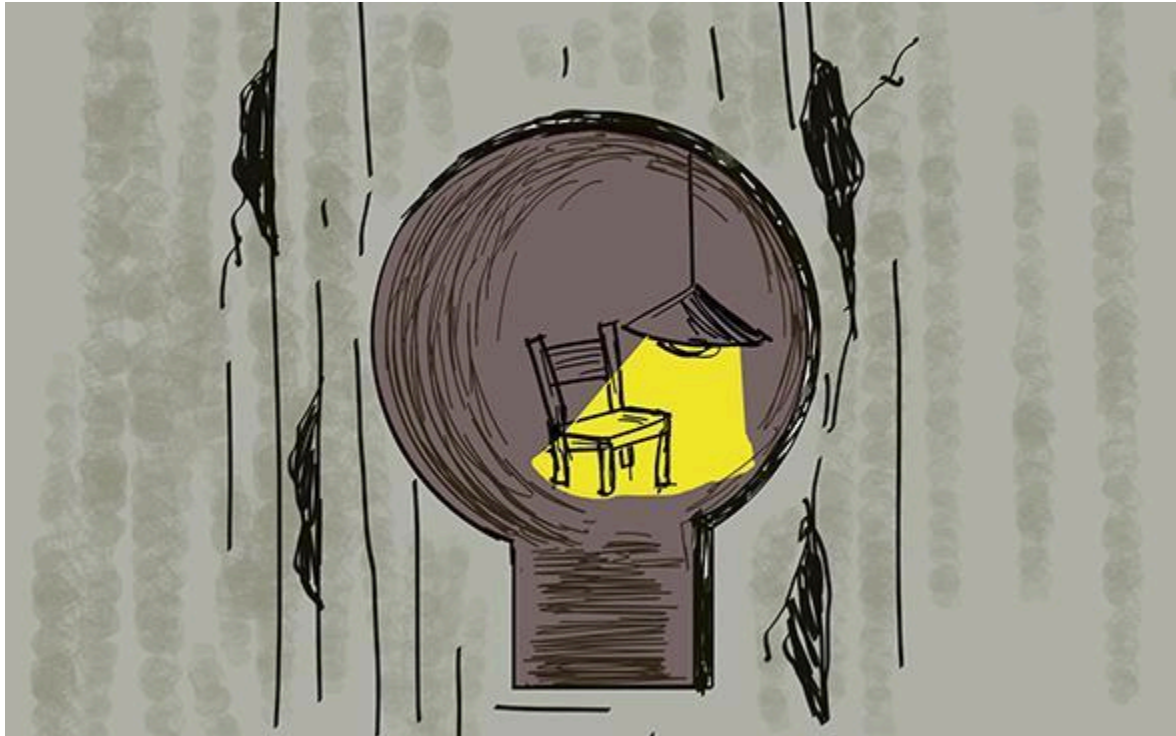
After arrest, another hurdle that people in Tajikistan face when it comes to the legal system is the denial of a fair public *trial*. Despite the law, no independent judiciary is provided and the executive branch of government trumped all the others, making the checks and balances system almost non-existent. Those in power would accept bribes, and those who were facing trial may see this as a last effort in their attempts at freedom. The cycle of bribery makes room for further corruption and an endless lack of trust in the law.

The way that it is setup, “Although the law requires that defendants be informed of the criminal charges against them within 10 days, in practice they were not always promptly informed or granted a trial without undue delay. Courts generally allowed defendants to be present at their trial and to consult with an attorney during the trial, but defendants often were denied access to an attorney during the pretrial

and investigatory periods, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Authorities continued to file politically motivated criminal charges against some defense lawyers to obstruct detained political opposition figures' access to legal counsel and to dissuade other lawyers from taking on similar cases. " (Tajikistan Human Rights Report 2021).

The fear and intimidation pushed on to those who could help, adds fuel to the flames and allows for more interference from those in power so that trial can be swayed in their favor rather than that of the person being tried.

Torture



The final hurdle we cross is that of *torture*. Inflicting physical or mental suffering on a defenseless person is a violation of human dignity. It is recognized as unethical worldwide, although some places still take part. Another section of Tajikistan's 2021 Human Rights Report focused on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The definition of torture in the legal sense has been contorted to make it possible for Tajikistan's government to do it behind the scenes. When conducting interrogations, investigations, and prosecutions, it was reported that there was mistreatment, beatings, and physical abuse used as forms of coercion to get information out of the suspect.

There were many cases in which this happened, one being the story of Komil Khojanazarov, who was tortured by officers resulting in him committing suicide. He "recorded a video message in August of that year, saying that he was tortured by police and national security officers during his arrest and subsequent detention. Gulmira Khotamova, Khojanazarov's wife, filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Committee for National Security in December 2020 and demanded compensation in the amount of 280,000 somoni (\$24,889). The CAT said that the amount of

compensation awarded by the military court is negligible and does not correspond to the harm caused to his family” (Tajikistan Human Rights Report 2021).

In other cases, confessions were given under duress. In every situation, the family is directly affected. Human Rights organizations were not given access to investigate the claims thoroughly, but local nongovernmental organizations keep documenting more and more victims of torture.

Conclusion

Through these hurdles of arrest, trial, and torture, we see a common pattern of disregard of human rights. Although distressing to read about, the takeaway from all of this is that through actions and practices, the government proves that it does not treasure its people. As said before, “understanding what type of government Tajiks want demands that we listen to ordinary people” (Collins 215). Power creates an illusion of importance over others and leads to these acts of corruption to occur without checks. Hopefully in our lifetime, we will get to see a change in government and an improvement in human rights policy. Most importantly, hopefully we get to see a healthier relationship built between those in power and its people; not only in Tajikistan, but around the world.

Sources:

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