



# Online Activism in Politically Restricted Central Asia: A Comparative Review of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan

Bahtiyar Kurambayev

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## Abstract

This comparative study examined the Internet's role and wider social media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, three Central Asian countries in the democratization process. Specifically, this work aims to discuss how the Internet and social media are allowing Internet users wider opportunities to access and share information in a media-restricted region as well as collectively speak up in a restricted region of Central Asia. In general, Internet penetration is relatively low compared to other parts of the world. Still, the Internet has demonstrated its power in the region when presidents of Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and in 2010 were ousted. Both times, the Internet played the key role in facilitating such drastic change. While it is true that Central Asian countries have differently related policies and practices, varying from some freedom in Kyrgyzstan and total state control in Uzbekistan, it is also true that the region is experiencing an unprecedented boom in mobile phones, which brings the Internet to citizens.

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B. Kurambayev (✉)  
Department of Media and Communications, College of Social Sciences, KIMEP University,  
Almaty, Kazakhstan  
e-mail: [b.kurambayev@kimep.kz](mailto:b.kurambayev@kimep.kz)

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Online activism · Censorship · Surveillance · Central Asia · Democracy · Authoritarian government · Social media · Internet · Former Soviet Union

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**Introduction**

A great deal of research has been conducted around the world about the role of the Internet in nondemocratic contexts. Some scholars now subscribe to the belief that the Internet has a positive relationship with democratization processes in authoritarian contexts and elsewhere. They argue that the Internet is associated with regime changes in places like Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Algeria, Ukraine, and elsewhere, where rulers of several decades were forced from power. In other places, new communication technology has been used extensively to achieve smaller-scale positive results, such as protest mobilization and collectively speaking up against the government in Tunisia (Breuer et al. 2014), awareness campaigns of electoral fraud in parliamentary elections in Russia (Reuter and Szakonyi 2015), and coordinating and organizing uprisings after 2009 elections in Iran (Wojcieszak and Smith 2014). Supporters of positive influence of the Internet argue that it would not be possible to accomplish such successful and fundamental changes in abovementioned restrictive and authoritarian locations without the Internet. What is striking about these waves of uprisings and mass protests is that the Internet, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and bloggers, played an important role in communicating, coordinating, and channeling this rising tide of opposition and variously managed to bypass state-controlled national media as they propelled images and ideas of resistance and mass defiance (Cottle 2011) (Table 1).

Others have argued that the Internet has a limited influence and even negative relationship with democratization process. For example, Vanderhill (2015) argues that much of the existing literature that is critical of the democratization process relies on how authoritarian governments can control and manipulate the Internet to prevent challenges and maintain their rule (p. 32). Vanderhill (2015) offers three arguments why the Internet has limited influence on democratization in non-democratic and authoritarian countries. First, information communication technology does not always succeed in organizing activities and protests against the regime because of the strength of the regime. Second, some authoritarians have coercive capacity to resist democratization demands. Third, even if information and communication technology (ICT) helps facilitate mass mobilization, such recruitment is insufficient for full democratization in the long-term changes. Furthermore, there is a growing literature to suggest that governments may use social media for carefully coordinated messages, including for the spread of misinformation (Howard and Bradshaw 2017; Marwick and Lewis 2017).

Despite the plethora of studies around the world about the role of the Internet in democratization process, almost no research has been conducted in Central Asia. This is a region, according to Freedman and Shafer (2012), that scholars have barely

**Table 1** Internet Penetration Rate in Central Asian Countries

Country	Internet penetration rate (percentage of population)	Facebook users (June 30, 2017)
Kazakhstan	76.8%	1,500,000
Kyrgyzstan	34.5%	360,000
Tajikistan	20.5	84,000

Note: Internet penetration rate and number of Facebook users as of June 30, 2017. Source: Internet World Stats (2017)

touched the surface from an academic perspective: “There is no shortage of potential research topics pertaining to the press, journalism and mass communication in the region, given globalization and the rapid changes in communications technologies, such efforts would be particularly timely” (p. 124). So, this chapter reviews the extent to which the Internet has the potential to play a role in facilitating democratization process in former Soviet Union Central Asia, specifically in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This chapter also reviews recent events and developments related to the Internet and social media in these abovementioned countries.

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## Context of Central Asia

To understand the relevance of this chapter, it is important to understand wider socioeconomic and political context of Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are former Soviet Union countries. All three gained their independence in 1991 when the Soviet Union formally collapsed. Since independence, these countries have seen few changes in leadership. For example, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev has been in power since 1991. Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon has been president of the country since 1992. The only exception in the region is Kyrgyzstan. The new constitution adopted in 2010 in this country bars the same individual from serving as president more than one term, with a term lasting 6 years. However, the first two presidents of the country, Askar Akayev (in 2005) and Kurmanbek Bakiyev (in 2010), both were ousted from office by people’s revolutions. Overall, since independence, these countries have achieved various levels of political and economic successes.

Mass media outlets in all of these three countries are under government control. “News website blocking and Russian-inspired laws to curtail free expression are spreading, while journalists are often subject to torture and unlawful imprisonment” (Reporters Without Borders 2017) in reference to all Central Asian countries. Reporters Without Borders said authoritarian tendencies in Central Asia are on the rise because there is a growing fearful environment for independent journalists to work in the region. Bowe et al. (2012) argue that Central Asian republics remain bastions of official and extralegal censorship, self-censorship, constraints on journalists and news organizations, and insufficient financial resources to support independent, and sustainable, market-based press systems (p. 145). Respect to human

rights in the region remains disregarded. Human Rights Watch documents various incidences of violations of basic human rights in the region. The organization's latest report from 2017 outlines some of them. For example, Kazakhstan restricts peace protests and jail those who dare to do so. Tajikistan has imprisoned more than 150 activists on politically motivated charges since the middle of 2015. "Under the pretext of protecting national security, Tajikistan's state telecommunications agency regularly blocks websites that carry information potentially critical of the government, including Facebook, Gmail, Radio Ozodi, the website of Radio Free Europe's Tajik service, news and opposition websites" (Human Rights Watch 2017). The Kyrgyz Republic is one of Central Asia's poorest countries. According to the Heritage Foundation's 2017 report of Index of Economic Freedom, corruption is pervasive in the country, and this is why judges are reported to pay bribes to attain their positions. Despite some anticorruption efforts, the country is trapped in a cycle in which predatory political elites use government resources to reward clients, including organized crime figures, and punish opponents (Freedom House 2017).

In this restrictive region of Central Asia, Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) argue that the Internet seems to be the only way to be read and heard in Kyrgyzstan, but their argument can be applied to wider Central Asia where free expression is curtailed and all mass media outlets are under government control. Given this context, understanding how the Internet and wider social media may have played a role in the recent changes of the region takes on great urgency.

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## More Government Control over the Internet and Social Media

Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country by land mass in the world and the largest one in Central Asia. The country has a population of 18 million and is the largest economy in the region. Nursultan Nazarbayev has been the leader of the country since its independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union, and since then he has been elected multiple times. However, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reports that none of the presidential elections held in the country were noted fair and free in compliance with democratic standards. Human Rights Watch reports Kazakh authorities tolerate little public criticism of the government or its record. While the government of Kazakhstan has long restricted the right to freedom of association and the right to carry out peaceful dissent, in recent years the government has further tightened controls over trade unions and civil society groups (Human Rights Watch 2017). According to Reporters Without Borders, Kazakhstan ranks 157th out of 180 countries in the world in terms of press freedom. In Freedom House ranking, Kazakhstan is ranked among "not free" countries in *Freedom in the World 2017*, among "not free" countries in *Freedom of the Press 2016*. The same can be said for Kazakhstan's position in *Freedom on the Net 2016*. Kazakhstan receives a democracy score of 6.61, on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 as the worst possible score, in *Nations in Transit 2016*. In other international organizations' evaluations, Kazakhstan is ranked among the countries of authoritarian regime (Economist's Democracy Index 2017), earning 3.06 out of 10. The higher the score a country earns, the more

democratic it is. In terms of government accountability, this Central Asian nation is ranked 134th among 176 countries in Transparency International Index in its latest report.

Kazakhstan does have some features to appear that it is moving toward democratization, such as multiparty parliament and the fact that almost 80 percent of all media outlets in the country are private (IREX 2017), but in reality most of these media outlets are affiliated with the government or officials. Kazakhstan has in recent years moved further in the direction of restricting press freedom by repressive methods of limiting access to information in the country, and such methods are continuing (IREX 2017; Emrich et al. 2013). The IREX report describes some limitations for journalists, including significantly delayed responses, irrelevant answers, and statements that a question is within the competence of the responder. Some independent news outlets continue operating in the country, but they routinely face political pressure and state interference (Emrich et al. 2013). Emrich and his colleagues note that the country is characterized by lack of pluralism and prevalence of pro-government outlets, especially among the broadcast media, which often are either directly owned by the state or by highly loyal government officials or businesses affiliated with them. In this context, journalists and editors self-censor themselves, fearing administrative, civil, and criminal prosecutions, and IREX (2017) reports that media outlets have blacklists of persons unsuitable for airing and a list of forbidden subjects and names. Those who try to do independent journalism face many troubles. For example, Kazakh journalism and press freedom defender Ramazan Yesergepov was stabbed in May 2017 (Committee to Protect Journalists 2017a). Yesergepov had scarcely begun the journey of roughly 1200 kilometers (745 miles) north from Almaty to Astana to discuss threats to media freedom with foreign diplomats when he was stabbed. Zhanbolat Mamay, editor of the independent newspaper *Sayasi kalam/Tribuna*, was arrested in 2017 after allegedly receiving illegal funds. Overall, Freedom House noted that authorities in Kazakhstan continued to arrest and prosecute journalists and social media users on a range of criminal charges in 2017 restrict freedom of speech freedom of speech.

Niyazbekov (2017) notes that Arab Spring protests in 2011–2012 and similar developments elsewhere signaled to post-communist dictators to treat social media networks with caution. He cites the case of Uzbekistan when former President Islam Karimov banned social media in early 2010. He also noted that Kazakhstan did not pay much attention to controlling social media, assuming developments like the Arab Spring would never reach Kazakhstan's border. Niyazbekov also notes that the Kazakh government was wrong. An example he and many other scholars discussed is the mass protests in the city of Zhanaozen. This is reported to be the worst civic conflict in the post-Soviet history in Kazakhstan and social media played a role in it. In December 2011 during the celebration of the country's 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, oil workers clashed with the state police. These oil workers were on strike since May 2011 following disputes over pay and working conditions (Beisembayeva et al. 2013; Achilov 2016). These oil workers demanded higher salaries and better working conditions. Beishembayeva and her colleagues wrote that 16 people were killed and 100 were injured during the uprising. These

authors note that YouTube videos demonstrated that police fired directly into the large crowd, prompting President Nursultan Nazarbayev to impose a state of emergency in Zhanaozen. International outlets placed casualties at 73 (Niyazbekov 2017), and all forms of communication with the rest of the country were cut off, including mobile phone and Internet services. The government cut all forms of communication with the outside with the intention of preventing the uprising from spreading elsewhere in the country. While authorities claimed that police were there to defend themselves, eyewitnesses reportedly observed the security forces opening fire indiscriminately at unarmed protestors (BBC, December 16 2011). The significance of this case is that protestors used social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to mobilize resources, attract popular support, and appeal to foreign governments and international organizations (Niyazbekov 2017). Niyazbekov also notes that the Zhanaozen massacre resulted in the government curbing press freedom and heightening control over the public. In September 2011, Kazakhstan's general prosecutor was quoted as saying "the question of control over social networks, over the internet, is a question of time. . .countries must join efforts to counter this evil" (Freedom on the Net 2012). The Zhanaozen crisis marks the major challenge to the government of Kazakhstan with the use of social media.

It is important to understand the context of Kazakhstan's wider Internet usage. Specifically, Kazakhstan's government made the development of digital information technologies a national priority (Emrich et al. 2013) and aims to give 100 percent of households the opportunity to access to information communication technologies by 2020. Kazakhstan is still pushing hard to digitize the nation but only for economic growth. Most people access the Internet from their mobile devices and at home in Kazakhstan. Free access is available in many public areas. According to Internet World Stats website as of June 30, 2017, almost 77% of Kazakhstan's population has access to the Internet. Mostly, Internet connection fees range from as little as KZT 3830 (\$12) to the fastest available at KZT 19,900 (roughly \$57). Overall, Kazakhstan is listed among Internet "not free" countries, according to the latest 2017 Freedom House report on Internet freedom around the world. The report highlights some of the developments in the country. It said authorities imprisoned activists attempting to organize protests using social media. It also said that overall environment remains oppressive to ICT users, with continued online censorship and arrests of social media users.

"Imposing systematic censorship under the rubric of national security allows the regime to limit even further the freedom of Kazakhstan's new media: in a move that is reminiscent of China's large-scale blocking strategy" (Anceschi 2015, p. 294). Kazakhstan authorities used criminal charges against social media users in an effort to silence dissent and punish online mobilization, issuing prison sentences of up to 5 years. Opposition activists and dissidents were targeted with malware attacks likely originated from the government (Freedom House 2017). At the time of writing this chapter, Kazakhstan's government has reportedly accepted new amendments to existing law that Kazakh Internet users will no longer be able to post comments online anonymously (Zakon.kg 2017). Details about this new law are yet to be revealed. But social media users are already in trouble for their "behavior" online.

Facebook user Alexander Babanov faced a libelous lawsuit for a social media post about accidents that allegedly happened in a local plant in the city of Pavlodar. The former head of the local plant filed a libel lawsuit against Babanov seeking 10 million Kazakh tenge (\$30,000). Another example is when a woman was financially fined for using her Facebook to allege that criminal activity was taking place in neighboring apartments (Tolukhanova 2016). Criminal charges were brought to some social media users in the country for allegedly inciting religious and ethnic discord (IREX 2017).

Turning to the situation in Kyrgyzstan, the country has suffered from political instability and widespread corruption. Two revolutions occurred since 1991 in the country, with the deadliest ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and minority Uzbeks occurring in 2010 when almost a half of million people were displaced, with thousands of fleeing to neighboring Uzbekistan (BBC 2010). Overall, the country is the most dynamic in terms of the frequency of collective protests among the countries in Central Asia (Achilov 2016) because the country's politics are largely shaped by clan-based loyalties, weak institutions, fragmented independent elites, and regional differences with the country. This can explain why Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries among the former Soviet Union countries. Almost 1 million out of the 6 million population are abroad in search of jobs, primarily in Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere. This can be further noted by the fact that a Kyrgyz lawmaker initiated a draft law in 2016 to seek humanitarian aid.

But the country's post-independence history is frequently cited among academics who support the view that the Internet facilitates the democratization process. This is because the Internet and wider social media sites played an instrumental role in the people's first revolution in 2005 that ousted President Askar Akayev from power (McGlinchey and Johnson 2007; Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007). Specifically, on March 24, 2005, about 20,000 people demanded President Akayev's resignation (Hiro 2009; Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007) because of the manipulation of the parliamentary election held in February 2005 and because of growing public discontent toward rampant corruption, widespread poverty in the country, and failed economic policies (Achilov 2016). Specifically, Radnitz (2012) noted that election manipulation included paying cash to buy votes. This is why thousands of people showed up in the capital city of Bishkek to demand invalidation of the parliamentary election held in the previous month, February 2005. In response to public protest, the Kyrgyz government blocked all traditional media outlets but the Internet. Access to the Internet was relatively low level, and it is possible that the Kyrgyz government did not consider the Internet to be a serious threat. "Most of the domestic media were in a difficult position when reporting about the events, as no one knew whether the president was still in the country" (Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007, p. 30). In such context, domestic media outlets were providing unreliable accounts, leading people to search for alternative sources of information on the Internet (Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007). In their work, Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) extensively discussed how the website [Akaevu.net](http://Akaevu.net) played an important role to keep people informed about what was happening in the country. Kulikova and Perlmutter argued that the Internet is the only venue for people to express themselves because mass

media outlets in the country are under government control. Even though Kyrgyzstan's media freedom ranking is higher than other countries in the region, journalists are threatened, harassed, violently attacked, prosecuted, and imprisoned (Freedman and Shafer 2012; Pitts 2011; Kurambayev 2016). Journalists in Kyrgyzstan work in a fearful environment (Toralieva 2014) not only for physical threats but also large financial lawsuits. Also, journalists earn so little that they commonly sell the "news" (Mould and Schuster 1999), and some journalists have "extortion" practices while government agencies and even international organizations operating in the country bribe journalists (Kurambayev 2017). At the time of writing this chapter, a British journalist working for the French news agency AFP was denied entry to Kyrgyzstan upon arrival in December 2017 and told he was banned from the ex-Soviet republic in Central Asia (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 9, 2017). Also, local journalist Elnura Alkanova was facing a legal threat for her independent investigative work. Specifically, a local bank urged local authorities to open a criminal case for her investigative report allegedly sharing classified information about the bank's clients. In such context and specifically during the 2005 revolution, Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) argued the Internet encouraged people to share information, post comments, ask questions, and mobilize like-minded groups of people to group together for collective actions against the government via [Akaevu.net](#) website and some other blogging platforms. This [Akaevu.net](#) website was used to share information about planned gatherings for people to join forces to stand up against the government's election manipulation. Eventually, then-President Askar Akayev fled the country and sought asylum elsewhere. This marked the first time in the region a state leader was forced to step down and seek asylum in a foreign country.

Melvin and Umaraliev (2011) argued that this 2005 revolution contributed to the development of new media in the country. This is because international organizations felt that the Internet could facilitate positive change in the country, and therefore international organizations supplied the country with the software and extensive computer and network equipment in return for cooperation from the Kyrgyz government to keep the Internet deregulated (McGlinchey and Johnson 2007). For example, Transitions Online along with Open Society Institute (previously known as Soros Foundation) funded projects developing citizen journalism by offering free of charge training on how to use computers and the Internet to anyone who wanted to learn. Five years later, people extensively used social media sites for exchange of information during people's second revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Melvin and Umaraliev 2011). This marked the second people's popular revolution in the country since its independence in 1991. The reasons for the second people's revolution are similar to the previous revolution, including wide-scale corruption, growing living expenses, and a deteriorating economy. On April 6, 2010, a group of people protested against the government's decision to increase tariffs significantly. Specifically, the Kyrgyz government had increased heating costs up to 400% and electricity up to 170% in February of 2010. So, on April 6, 2010, the protest turned violent in a clash with state police. Such protests spread to other cities, gradually moving more toward violent demonstrations, including taking hostages of certain



high-ranking government officials. President Bakiyev declared a state of emergency and took total control of media outlets, but social media users were tweeting about the protests using the hashtag #freekg to disseminate information (Melvin and Umaraliyev 2011). Social media platforms were key places to obtain and share information. As a result of this revolution, another president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, had to flee to a foreign country to seek asylum.

Overall, almost 35% of Kyrgyzstan's population has access to the Internet (International Telecommunications Union 2016; Freedom House 2017). But the government of Kyrgyzstan is also attempting to digitize the nation like neighboring Kazakhstan by bringing Internet connections to all educational institutions, including secondary schools, with the help of international organizations and foreign governments. As of December 5, 2017, 55% of all secondary schools have been connected to the Internet (Bengard 2017, 24.kg website), and more than 4000 computers were purchased to distribute among schools. The average cost of an Internet connection can be around \$15 per month in major cities of the country, while rural areas might be slightly higher. More and more Wi-Fi public locations are appearing in major cities. Private and state transportation companies have recently begun offering free Wi-Fi on public transportation.

There are some other examples where the power of the Internet and wider social media played a positive role in the context of Kyrgyzstan at a small scale where people collectively chose to speak up against Kyrgyz government's wrongdoings via the Internet, leading authorities to respond and/or take actions. For example, locally well-known singer Dilshat Kangeldieva shared her frustration about the authority's reported refusal to accept a report about stolen items from her car on December 17, 2017. She wanted the police officers to investigate the theft. The Kyrgyz singer said in her post that Kyrgyz officers on duty suggested her "forgive those thieves and move on" and that those officers on duty even accused her that because of her, they [officers] could not have a dinner and that they were hungry. As a result of social media users' collective frustration about police handling this case, an investigation was launched. This is one of thousands of cases where people are now using social media to express their frustration about government incompetence. Another recent case involved a schoolteacher beating students in class while students secretly recorded the teachers. Once shared via YouTube, the Ministry of Education fired the teacher in question and issued a statement to all teachers in the country to honor the professional code of conduct. A very notable example included when social media users in the country collectively spoke up about government's wrongdoing that led Kyrgyz authorities to focus more about controlling social media users so social media users do not challenge Kyrgyz authorities in any format. The incident began in 2015 when lawmakers announced that they wanted to buy new furniture, such as chairs, to replace old ones. Parliament announced that that it had ordered 120 new chairs at a cost of 2.6 million soms, or over US \$38,000 (BBC 2015). The BBC reported that each planned chair would cost \$310 apiece. Social media users inundated social media platforms with their frustration about the purchases coming during a time when government officials regularly spoke about the need to cut

government spending. As a result of massive frustration, parliament dropped the plan to purchase new furniture.

This may have led the Kyrgyz government to realize that social media users in the country are having tremendous influence on government decision-making. In this context, the Kyrgyz government has been strengthening its control over the Internet and social media platforms and suppressing online criticism of the Kyrgyz government and government officials. For example, Kyrgyz lawmaker Irina Karamushkina said that Internet users often criticize the president and officials and urged authorities to pursue online critics. The deputy chief of National Security suggested in one parliamentary meeting that Internet users critical of president and officials are being identified (Mamytova 2016). Also, Privacy International reported that the Kyrgyz government purchased sophisticated Western technology to spy on the entire country's Internet communication (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2014). Since then, a foreign citizen was deported from the country for his social media post about Kyrgyzstan, and numerous locals were detained for social media behavior such as liking or sharing certain content, etc. Some Facebook users were taken to court for damaging comments about officials, while some lost their jobs as a result of their social media posts. While the Kyrgyz government may justify such control with the justification of fighting terrorism and online radicalization, they may have a chilling effect on freedom of speech and expression online. Kyrgyz lawmakers have recently proposed a law that would demand that social media users use their real name, make their contact information visible to all, and verify any information before posting online.

While Tajikistan formally boasts many features of democracy, such as multiple political parties, elections, and laws that protect civil liberties, the country has struggled with poverty and instability since its independence. Tajikistan, with a population of about 8 million people, is the smallest country in the region and one of the poorest countries of Eurasia. Upon its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country faced civil war during the 1992–1997 years, disrupting economic production facilities. Since then, the country seems to have achieved some political stability. However, currently, 33% of the economically active population has left the country (like citizens of neighboring Kyrgyzstan) in search of employment opportunities abroad, primarily in Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere. The remittance from these labor migrants consists of 50% of Tajikistan's GDP (UNDP 2017). The current rate of unemployment is at 33%, according to the World Bank.

Tajikistan is an authoritarian state dominated politically by President Emomali Rahmon and his supporters, says the 2017 report of US Department of State. The report also noted that the most significant human rights problems included citizens' inability to change their government through free and fair elections, repression, increased harassment of civil society and political activists, and restrictions on freedoms of expression, media, and the free flow of information, including through the repeated blockage of several independent news and social networking websites. President Rahmon's family members hold many prominent government positions. For example, his daughter Ozoda Rahmonva served as a deputy foreign minister. She was later appointed as the president's chief of staff. Another daughter is the head

of Foreign Ministry's international relations department (Putz 2017). His son is the mayor of the capital city of Dushanbe. Tajikistan's human rights record continues to deteriorate amid an ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression and the political opposition, as well as the targeting of independent lawyers, journalists, and even the family members of opposition activists abroad (Human Rights Watch 2017). The authorities persecute and arrest journalists and political opposition leaders and curtail the free flow of information (Shafiev and Miles 2015, p. 301).

Like other countries in the region, corruption in Tajikistan is widespread and at all levels of society. Rule of law is weak and most institutions lack transparency and integrity structures (Transparency International 2017). Criminal groups have considerable influence on judicial functions, while bribery of judges, who are poorly paid and poorly trained, is commonplace (Library of Congress). The 2017 Media Sustainability Index (MSI) report for Tajikistan says that more than 40% of the population lives in poverty. Freedom House reported that recent constitutional changes in 2016 formally removed presidential term limits and lowered the minimum age for presidential candidates from 35 to 30. The changes effectively allow Rahmon to rule indefinitely and also render his 29-year-old son eligible for candidacy in the 2020 presidential election.

In terms of freedom of speech and expression and the media, Tajikistan has an atmosphere of intimidation for journalists (IREX 2017). The IREX report notes that many sources in the country do not talk to journalists partly because of fear of the authorities. This is why most news outlets focus more on social issues and culture to avoid harassment, intimidation, firing, or worse (Gross and Kenny 2011). Gross and Kenny argue that censorship and self-censorship are among the paralyzing problems faced by the Tajik media and society. The media avoid covering the president's family and private life, corruption in the top ranks of government, and activities of the special services, tax services, and their business partners. The report also noted that hacking of the email and social accounts of journalists and civil society activists, phone tapping, and others forms of cyber-crime are becoming routine in the country. Citing national security in fighting terrorism, Tajikistan government requires all subscriber identity module (SIM) cards reregister in the country. Since 2012, Tajikistan has begun to repress its opposition and others through pro-active online measures (Shafiev and Miles 2015). A group of volunteers monitored websites and social media, informing relevant state authorities when national interests and the state image were in danger or when the country was being humiliated (Shafiev and Miles 2015).

Approximately 20 percent of the population has regular access to the Internet, and monthly Internet connection fees seem to range from \$50 to \$200, which is out of reach for many people. Daily wintertime power outages can be another obstacle for public use of the Internet. Overall, Tajikistan regularly blocks access to social media sites including YouTube, Facebook, Google Services, etc. Once, Tajikistan State Communications Service Mr. Bek Zuhurov said that hundreds of citizens requested he shut down social media access, including Facebook (Shafiev and Miles 2015), and the government's blocking of access to social media is to follow the people's request. Because of the irregularity of Internet access and the government's steps to

block some of the popular social media and news websites, journalists say these sites can be unreliable in reaching out to people. There are certain moments when Tajikistan's government seems to restrict flow of information. First, blocking systematically follows an event, such as military action, which the government did not want publicized, or when articles, audio, or video leaks or discussions that made the government uncomfortable appear online (Shafiev and Miles 2015, p. 307). Second, it happens during times when groups (including political groups) are created on Facebook, the social media site Odnoklassniki, or any other social media sites where opposition political leaders use platforms to criticize the Tajik government. However, every time, the state denies that any state orders for censorship exist. For example, Shafiev and Miles discussed one case that occurred in 2013 involving Gruppa 24, a political opposition group founded in Moscow by Tajik government critic Umarali Quvvatov. He propagated on the social media site Odnoklassniki about planned a protest in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan. While online, the protest attracted the attention of hundreds of supporters. News website [EurasiaNet.org](http://EurasiaNet.org) reported that Quvvatov was shot and killed in 2015 in Istanbul. Shafiev and Miles also discuss a similar case when a bid in social media about gathering a protest at the High Court of Tajikistan. The purpose of this protest was to protest against the detention of new political party Zaid Saidov. However, Tajik police became aware of this planned protest ahead of the actual protest date and were well prepared for it. But the major wave of calls for protest generated via social media against President Emomali Rahmon's government occurred in 2014. Tajik diaspora from Russian cities, including Moscow, Ekaterinburg, and other cities, called for massive protests in Tajikistan. It is important to note that almost 90% of all Tajik migrants who left the country in search of employment abroad are in Russia. Such social media calls led Tajikistan government to block dozens of websites countrywide and led to a complete Internet shutdown (Shafiev and Miles 2015), all while sending armed vehicles to Dushanbe. At the time of this writing, Tajikistan's Taxation Department argued that social media platforms should be blocked because of a declining state budget and that Tajik people are using other social media (Skype, WeChat, IMO, Viber) more to communicate with each other rather than making a traditional phone call (Asia Plus, December 21 2017). Yet, government officials frequently appeal to the collective memory and fears of civil war, warning that views on the Internet could cause a resurgence in violence (Shafiev and Miles 2015, p. 308). "Authorities began to ride the Internet wave; beyond volunteers reporting slanders, a large number of users with fake names and pictures now defend state positions" (Shafiev and Miles 2015, p. 315). Tajikistan, along with other countries in Central Asia, reportedly purchased a sophisticated Western technology to spy on its citizens inside and abroad. The Privacy International report noted that:

some [Central Asian] countries are equipped with sophisticated surveillance capabilities that allow the monitoring of communications on a mass scale. . . . These surveillance capabilities are centralized and accessed by security agencies in monitoring centers, located across the region, allowing agents to intercept, decode and analyze the private communications of thousands of people simultaneously.

In such context, social media users often self-censored their views while posting on the Internet.

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## Conclusions

Although this work may seem of concern to only a small group of readers of Central Asia, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about the Internet and its potential power to democratize authoritarian countries and how governments can use repression technology to undermine freedom of information online (Tucker et al. 2017). While it is true that existing literature offers mixed conclusions about whether the Internet opens previously closed societies – for example, “much of the present excitement about the internet, particularly the high hopes that are pinned on it in terms of opening up closed societies, stems from selective and, at times, incorrect readings of history” (Morozov 2012, p. xi) – others argue that the Internet facilitates democratization process by giving access to information even among those who previously paid little attention (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Hamilton and Tolbert 2012). Some other scholars regularly cite the “Arab Spring” as an example of their view that the Internet can promote democracy regardless of contexts. This chapter demonstrates from recent examples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan that social media democratizes access to information, promotes and coordinates political planning, and pursues collective activism and a group of like-minded people together, while social media can be used simultaneously to censor and manipulate information to try to silence others’ voices, including through hindering access to information or threatening or employing trolls to change the conversation online (Tucker et al. 2017).

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Asian contributions to Communication for Development and Social Change](#)
- ▶ [Media and Participation](#)
- ▶ [Participatory Communication and Community Development](#)
- ▶ [Participatory Communication, Community and People](#)
- ▶ [Theorizing Participation as Communicative Action for Development and Social Change: Communication Campaigns for Social Change](#)

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