

# Tajikistan

Internet access in Tajikistan remains largely unfettered, although the run-up to the December 2006 presidential elections produced a documented case of event-driven filtering of a political Web site. Overall Internet penetration remains weak, and the telecommunications sector is relatively unencumbered by regulation—a consequence of the decentralized nature of the government (itself a result of the compromise that ended the civil war in 1997).



## Background

The Internet in Tajikistan emerged as the country was ending a bloody civil war that followed the demise of Soviet rule in the early 1990s. The resulting fragmentation of power also meant that Internet services were developed largely without state interference and the Ministry of Communications played a weak role in the development of the sector. Internet as well as telecommunications services remained fragmented up until the end of the 1990s, with several companies failing to interconnect because of fierce (and at times violent) competition. During the period of instability, Internet service providers (ISPs)

were aligned with feuding political and economic interests that spilled over to the competition among the ISPs themselves.

Internet use among Tajiks has been increasing, but remains relatively low (1.19 percent) despite government efforts to make information communications technology (ICT) a pillar of national development. Opposition media are not actively exploiting the Internet’s potential largely because of the low levels of penetration and the lack of a mature critical mass of Internet users. None of the registered opposition parties have domain names registered in the “.tj” Internet zone, and only one has its Web site available in Tajik.<sup>1</sup> The incumbent president, who recently

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

| Filtering         | No evidence of filtering | Suspected filtering | Selective filtering | Substantial filtering | Pervasive filtering |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Political         |                          |                     | ●                   |                       |                     |
| Social            | ●                        |                     |                     |                       |                     |
| Conflict/security | ●                        |                     |                     |                       |                     |
| Internet tools    | ●                        |                     |                     |                       |                     |
| Other factors     | Low                      | Medium              | High                | Not applicable        |                     |
| Transparency      |                          | ●                   |                     |                       |                     |
| Consistency       | ●                        |                     |                     |                       |                     |

## KEY INDICATORS



**Source (by indicator):** World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2004

started his third seven-year mandate,<sup>2</sup> exerts a degree of control over the independent media while suppressing the opposition with prosecutions based on broad and inconsistent interpretations of the relevant laws.<sup>3</sup>

### Internet in Tajikistan

The rate of Internet penetration in Tajikistan is estimated between 0.075 percent<sup>4</sup> and 1.19 percent.<sup>5</sup> Empirical data show the number of active Internet users to be growing rapidly, with estimated total numbers that are higher than the Ministry of Communications' estimate of 26,000.<sup>6</sup> The discrepancy in figures probably arises from the hesitancy of most commercial ISPs to disclose accurate user statistics in order to avoid a per user charge. No official data exist on the number of personal computers in Tajikistan. Khoma,<sup>7</sup> a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), estimates that 1 percent of households own personal computers and over 1 percent of those access Internet from home, mostly using dialup technology. Access via DSL and Wi-Fi technologies is affordable only to a handful of companies. Satellite connection is widely used and few ISPs use Mach 6 technology to connect mountain towns and district regions. The state-owned

telecommunications company Tajiktelecom built a connection to the Trans Asia Europe (TAE) fiber-optic highway passing through Uzbekistan; however, ISPs prefer to use their own infrastructure. The Internet exchange point in Tajikistan, managed by the Association of Tajikistani ISPs, connects only four of the eleven ISPs.

Internet access remains largely unaffordable, as the average monthly salary in the country amounts to USD30–40, while the minimum salary drops to USD7. The price for one hour of Internet access in cybercafés is USD0.41; unlimited monthly traffic by dialup access costs USD29.41 and limited ADSL access costs USD25.<sup>8</sup>

Most Internet users are young and access the Internet through cybercafés close to schools and universities. In January 2006, the Ministry of Communications estimated that some 400 cybercafés existed, most concentrated in large cities. The cybercafés, operating as second-tier ISPs, need to obtain licenses before starting their activity. Although over 70 percent of the population resides in rural areas, the Internet is mainly accessible in urban areas because of poor infrastructure and low affordability. A 2005 study by CIPI shows that over three-quarters of Internet users are male.<sup>9</sup>

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Tajik is the official national language. However, Russian is the most popular language for Internet use. The most-visited Web site in Tajikistan is [www.mail.ru](http://www.mail.ru), and the most popular search engines are [www.rambler.ru](http://www.rambler.ru), [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com), and [www.yandex.ru](http://www.yandex.ru).

### **Legal and regulatory frameworks**

The Tajik top-level domain name was registered with Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) in 1997 but the domain name was later suspended as it was used mainly for registering pornography sites. In 2003 the domain name registration was delegated to the Information and Technical Centre of the President of Tajikistan Administration, a state entity that now supervises registrations within the “.tj” domain.<sup>10</sup>

The Ministry of Communications requires all ISPs to obtain licenses in order to operate. Currently eleven first-tier ISPs are actively providing Internet service in the country.<sup>11</sup> The ISPs do not reveal information about their bandwidth because these data are a legally protected commercial secret. This protection extends to the countries from which the connection originates. ONI data reveal that most ISPs have two points of access, one located in Russia and the other in Western Europe. The majority of ISPs are eligible to provide Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services under an IP-telephony license.<sup>12</sup> Recent amendments require VoIP service providers to obtain a special license from the Ministry of Communications.

The main state entities regulating Internet in Tajikistan are the Security Council (SC), the ICT Council, and the Ministry of Communications. The president of the republic, however, remains the key authority, ratifying the main legal documents in the IT sector and directing ICT policy in the country. The SC controls the implementation of the State Strategy on Information and Communication Technologies for Development of the Republic of Tajikistan (E-Strategy). The SC monitors telecommunications, including Internet,

for national security reasons. The ICT Council<sup>13</sup> is responsible for implementing and coordinating work under the E-Strategy and advising the president. The Ministry of Communications is the main regulator in the telecommunications industry and is empowered to issue licenses for any related activities. The government adopted the Conception on the Information Security,<sup>14</sup> which serves as a platform for proclaiming official views, principles, and policy directions to preserve state information security.

The government restricts the distribution of information that contains state secrets and other privileged data that intend to “discredit dignity and honor of the state and the President,” or that contain “violence and cruelty, racial, national and religious hostility..., pornography... and any other information prohibited by law.”<sup>15</sup> The provisions of this regulation are broad, allowing state agencies wide discretion in their application. The control over information security is assigned to the Main Department of State Secrets and the Ministry of Security.

Tajikistan does not have an official policy on Internet filtering. However, state authorities have been known to restrict access to some Web sites at politically sensitive times by communicating their “recommendations” to all top-level ISPs. Prior to the 2006 presidential elections, the Communications Regulation Agency issued a “Recommendation on Filtering” advising all ISPs that “for the purpose of information security” they should “engage in filtering and close access to those Internet sites that are directed to undermining the state policy on information sphere.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, several oppositional news Web sites hosted in Russia or Tajikistan were inaccessible to Tajik users for several days.<sup>17</sup> Although the officials offered unclear reasons for shutting down the Web sites, independent media foresee that the list of affected sites might grow in the future.<sup>18</sup>

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## ONI testing results

ONI tested in Tajikistan on three key ISPs: Babilon-T, Tajiktelecom, and Telecomm-Technology. The tests revealed no direct evidence of filtering for any of the selected categories. Nevertheless, ONI did document the sporadic filtering of political content during the 2006 presidential election.

Considered the most conservative Central Asian country, with a predominantly Muslim population, Tajikistan does not technically filter access to pornography sites. However, accessing such sites in public centers is illegal. Any such access may be penalized with a fine ranging from USD15 to 100 as provided in the Administrative Code and may be prosecuted under the Criminal Code. Based on ONI's investigation, we concluded that currently most cybercafés do not employ any filtering applications to limit access to information. However, cybercafés routinely monitor users to ensure they do not visit forbidden sites.

## Conclusion

Although the government has adopted an e-strategy aimed at developing information society and employing ICT potential for spurring economic growth, it does not seek to encourage independent online publishers, journalists, and bloggers. Media freedom is widely challenged and subject to *de facto* censorship, although the constitution provides that "state censorship and prosecution for criticism are forbidden."<sup>19</sup> Filtering is unlikely to be declared as an official policy since Tajikistan depends on international aid. The Tajik government, however, has in place policies and instruments to maintain firm control over the distribution of information, particularly before elections. The government is engaged in developing programs aimed at restricting citizens' Internet access, following on from President Rahmonov's message that "Western values aren't always applicable" to Eastern countries.<sup>20</sup>

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## NOTES

1. See SNGNews.ru, <http://sngnews.ru/articles/5/67577.html> (in Russian) (accessed May 3, 2007).
2. See Joanna Lillis, "Tajikistan: No surprises in presidential elections," Eurasia Insight, November 6, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav110606a.shtml> (accessed May 2, 2007); and Nigora Buhari-zade, "The opposition raises protests," Deutsche Welle, August 29, 2006, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2150509,00.html> (in Russian).
3. In 2005 the State Licensing Commission formally denied BBC a license, basing its argumentations on a complex interpretation of the Law on Licensing Certain Types of Activities. See Eurasia Insight, "Tajik government "tightening the screws" on independent media," August 26, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav082506a.shtml>. In addition, in 2005 the leader of the main opposition party, Iskandarov, was convicted on terrorism and corruption charges and sentenced to a twenty-three-year prison term.
4. See InternetWorldStat, [http://www.internetworldstat.com/global\\_internet\\_stats.htm](http://www.internetworldstat.com/global_internet_stats.htm) (accessed May 2, 2007).
5. Estimate by the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (CIPi), Civil Initiative on IT Tajikistan.
6. Data of the Ministry of Communications of RT, AsiaPlus 30 (313) from January 24, 2006, <http://www.asiaplus.tj>.
7. Internews Network, <http://www.khoma.tj>.
8. See State Statistics Committee, <http://www.stat.tj>; Internet access tariffs of ISP Intercom, <http://www.intercom.tj>; and ISP Babilon-T, <http://www.tojikiston.com>.
9. 2005 study conducted by the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (CIPi), <http://www.cipi.tj>.
10. See the Tajikistani TLD hosting organization, Information and Technical Centre of the President of Tajikistan Administration, <http://www.nic.tj>.
11. A joint Tajik-American company, TACOM, stopped providing Internet service in the summer of 2006, but it is still a licensee.
12. See the Ministry of Communications, <http://www.mincom.tj>, Law on Telecommunications, law no 56 of 2002, May 10, 2002, <http://www.tajik-gateway.org/index.phtml?lang=en&id=1414>
13. The ICT Council was established by presidential decree no. 1707 of February 27, 2006.
14. The Conception was ratified by presidential decree no. 1175 of November 7, 2003.
15. Points 2 and 3 of regulation no. 389, "On Creating a Republican Network of Data Transfer and Measures to Order Access to Global Information Networks," August 8, 2001, (unofficial translation from Russian).

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16. Recommendation on Filtering sent to ISPs by the Communications Regulation Agency (unofficial translation), obtained by ONI researchers, December 2006.
  17. See Deutsche Welle, "Access to opposition media websites is forbidden in Tajikistan," October 8, 2006, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2198763,00.html>; Fergana News, "The websites officially blocked in Tajikistan were announced. Among them – Ferghana.Ru," October 9, 2006, <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=3633&mode=snews>; and SNGnews.ru, "In Tajikistan is closed the access to some websites," October 7, 2006, <http://sngnews.ru/articles/5/68007.html> (accessed May 2, 2007).
  18. See at SNGnews, "Internet Service Providers in Tajikistan are prepared for filtering of 'unsafe' Web sites," <http://sngnews.ru/articles/5/68051.html> (accessed May 3, 2007).
  19. Article 30 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, 1994.
  20. Joanna Lillis, "Tajikistan: No surprises in presidential elections," Eurasia Insight, November 6, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav110606a.shtml>.