

Tajikistan: Bribe Culture Allows Kids to Cash In

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A panoramic view of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

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Several unusual corruption cases in Tajikistan reveal that some kids have a rather unflattering idea about how government works. Minors are impersonating officials — including a member of the authoritarian president's family — to solicit bribes or favors.

The cases illustrate how favors and influence are bought in Tajikistan. They also seem to corroborate a Russian maxim used frequently in Tajikistan — a poverty-stricken country where the president has built himself a network of lavish palaces — to explain the top-down culture of moral decay: "The fish rots from the head."

Earlier in May, a tenth-grader in Dushanbe was detained after successfully soliciting a \$50,000 kickback by posing as President Emomali Rakhmon's 16-year-old son.

Khushdil Kurbonov, who is Somon Emomali's classmate at the prestigious Dushanbe International School, and his cousin carried out the caper last August, obtaining \$50,000 from a man in exchange for promising him 0.3 hectares of land and then instructing a local official to hand over the deed.

Government critics and ordinary people held up the story as symbolic of how business is done in Tajikistan, where mentioning a connection to the first family or other senior officials can open any door. The country ranks 152 out of 175 on Transparency International's most recent Corruption Perceptions Index.

The early May incident was not the first time in recent memory when a minor received money by impersonating an official.

Umedjon Abdurakhmonov, 17, from Rudaki district outside of Dushanbe, was detained by police in April and charged with fraud. He later appeared on state television confessing that last year he had called the head of a Dushanbe residential district and, claiming to be an assistant to Vice Premier Azim Ibromkhim, ordered the official to give 500 somoni (about \$100 at the time) to his 80-year-old grandmother.

Abdurakhmonov had previously called his father's new wife, claiming to be from the Supreme Court, and threatened criminal charges if his father did not pay alimony. Abdurakhmonov and his mother received the money the next day, state television reported. Abdurakhmonov was released after confessing.

Such mischief, of course, is not limited to minors. After being jailed for murder, Doston Sabzaev began calling officials and issuing instructions, pretending to be their senior: a passport for his wife, 1,000 somoni for his nephew, groceries for his mother. The officials complied, Asia-Plus reported last June.

In the case of Kurbonov, the boy who shook down a would-be real-estate investor for \$50,000, charges were dropped after he apologized and returned the money, Olimjon Nazarzoda, a spokesperson for the state anti-corruption agency — which is headed by another of the president's sons, Rustam Emomali — told EurasiaNet.org.

Legally, officials must receive written instructions to disburse cash and transfer property. But clearly that is not happening.

Abdugani Mamadazimov of the National Association of Political Scientists says the cases underscore that "universal corruption" in Tajikistan has become "a threat to national security."

Many Tajikistanis, Mamadazimov says, have given up trying to obey the law, worn down by bureaucratic procedures that seem designed to maximize the hassle of interacting with government, and where an informal payment is often the only way to get an official to lift a finger. "Corruption is impossibly developed and entrenched," Mamadazimov told EurasiaNet.org. "In such an atmosphere, dropping the name of a senior politician works like a password."

A May 14 op-ed in the critical Farazh newspaper described the trend as "a real nightmare

for our country." The author, Jamila Mirbozkhonova, lamented that "officials are ready to believe anyone who calls them and introduces themselves as a nephew, son-in-law, sister-in-law, adopted son, father figure, friend, classmate, village mate, hairdresser, cook or driver of the president."

Officials counter that such behavior is not routine.

Saifullo Safarov, an advisor to the president who serves as deputy chairman of the President's Center for Strategic Studies, blamed the duped officials for not following procedures and stressed that government orders cannot be issued over the telephone. "These officials are not vigilant. We also received a call and I got an order from some assistant of the president. However, I told him right away that these orders have to be written on paper and handed to me," he explained. "High level officials do not do this [issue orders by telephone], because they know it is illegal."

Still, the cases have stimulated soul searching in the former Soviet Union's poorest state.

"Just think about it, a 16-year-old boy demands \$50,000. Where did he get such an idea?" said 30-year-old Dushanbe resident Rakhmon Berdyev.

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