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Trouble in Tajikistan

The ISIS obsession of President Emomali Rahmon could lead to further turmoil.

By Cholpon Orozobekova

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Recent deadly attacks and instability in Tajikistan, which have left 27 people dead, have prompted worries in neighboring countries, which share similar vulnerabilities and weaknesses. The initial attacks targeted police units in and near Dushanbe. The man allegedly behind them is Deputy Defense Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda, a former opposition commander. The Tajik government says he is member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which was banned by the Tajik government days before the attacks were carried out. The IRPT says Nazarzoda was not a member and Tajik law bars members of the military from having political affiliations. The IRPT was once the main partner in an alliance that fought against government forces during the 1992-97 Tajik Civil War. Nazarzoda joined the security forces in June 1997, when the government and opposition signed a peace accord to end that conflict.

Last week's attacks took place in the context of several incidents that have sparked outrage among the country's believers. On August 28, Tajikistan banned the IRPT, giving it only 10 days to cease all activities. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has also banned Islamic dress, and even prohibited men from having beards. There have been reports of Dushanbe police detaining men in the streets and shaving off their beards.

Also on August 28, a student named Umar Bobojonov was detained in Vakhdat for wearing a long beard. He was then allegedly beaten so severely by police that he lay in a coma for a week. On September 3, local media reported that he had died. The next day, Vakhdat was targeted in one of the attacks.

Rahmon apparently believes the crackdown will stop the creeping Islamization and radicalization of Tajik society. To many Tajiks, however, the measures look more like a radicalization of society by its own government.

Who Is Nazarzoda?

Abduhalim Nazarzoda was a United Tajik Opposition (UTO) field commander for five years, fighting against the government forces during the civil war. After the peace accord, the Tajik government made him commander of the military unit 31001, which mostly comprised former members of UTO armed groups. Nazarzoda received his military education rather late in his career, earning a diploma from the Russian Military Academy in 2007 and graduating from Tajik National University in 2009. In January 2014, after serving for seven years as chief of the Security Department of Tajikistan's Ministry of Defense, Nazarzoda was tapped by Rahmon to serve as deputy minister.

Nazarzoda denies allegations that he was behind the initial attacks. In a September 6 statement, Nazarzoda said that he had learned that former UTO commanders were to be arrested. He did not believe it at first, but discovered that former UTO (and current police officer) Ziyoruddin Abdulloev had indeed been captured. The statement continued: "Several former warlords gathered at my house. We learned some time later that all exits from the town are blocked and we have been trapped. After a short discussion we decided to fight until the end than to be arrested and to die of tortures. We took weapon from one of military units by the morning and broke through the police cordon at one of exits of the city."

The death of student Umar Bobojonov was just the latest incident in a series of harsh actions taken by Tajik authorities to suppress all forms of Islamism. Alisher Ilkhamov, a research associate at the London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), said in an interview on September 5 that Bobojonov's death was "probably the last drop in the cup of patience of the former [UTO] members who apparently expected soon their own arrest, in light of the ongoing crackdown upon the Islamic Renaissance Party by the Rakhmonov regime. The revolt headed by General Nazarov was likely an action to outstrip the imminent mass arrest of former UTO members and regain initiative."

According to experts, Nazarzoda's goals are not yet clear. Some even doubt the authenticity of his statement, which was published on Facebook. According to Arkadiy Dubnov, a prominent journalist and Moscow-based expert on Central Asian issues, "This General was very close to President Rahmon, and he was neither an extremist nor [a] radical Islamist... we do not have any proof which would confirm that he was a member of Islamic opposition party so far. I don't believe that statement circulated on Facebook; he is lying or this statement is not authentic."

ISIS Fears

Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, are fearful of the influence of ISIS and other radical Islamic groups, and have been cracking down hard on religious movements. Even by these standards, though, Rahmon has been outspoken about the threat posed by ISIS, expressing deep concerns over its influence in Central Asia. The Tajik president consolidated his own power in a civil war against Islamists that ended in 1997, and it is hardly surprising that he is sensitive to any revival.

Many experts argue that the Tajikistan government has exaggerated the issue of Islamic radicalization, politicizing it as an excuse to crack down on any dissent, including political, civil and religious. In their fear of international jihad, Central Asian leaders themselves are emerging as the biggest security threat to their citizens.

Another factor in the current instability in Tajikistan may also lie in the breaching of the conditions of the Moscow peace accord signed by Rahmon and UTO in 1997, which guaranteed a 30 percent quota in the government and parliament for the opposition. By banning the Islamic opposition party Rahmon undermined this agreement, angering Nazarzoda and his supporters.

Alisher Ikhamov, a London-based expert on Central Asian issues, emphasizes that “the conditions of that accord were recently unilaterally undermined by Rahmon who first, by rigging the parliamentary elections, expelled the IRPT from the MP ranks, and then banned the party completely followed by taking on its leader Kabiri. Under the conditions of that agreement the UTO members were allowed [to have] their own political party and to run for the parliamentary elections.”

The hunt for Nazarzoda and his followers is underway. The Tajik Defense Ministry says that they have fled into hiding in the mountains of Romit Gorge, 150 kilometers east of Dushanbe, and latest reports indicate that they are surrounded there.

Rahmon said in a September 6 speech that the militants share the views of ISIS: “The terrorists with evil consciences pursued the same goals as Islamic State.” The Tajikistan president also noted that 46 Tajiks from Vahdat, where one of the attacks took place, joined ISIS and have been fighting in Syria. Rahmon called ISIS “the plague of the new century,” and warned that Tajiks who joined ISIS will “burn in Hell.”

Experts say that Rahmon wants to frame the crisis as an attack by Islamists. Dubnov argues that “[Rahmon] wants to show to the world that Tajikistan [is on the] frontlines in the fight against ISIS and his country is being attacked and has suffered a lot from terrorists. He wants to use the imaginary threat of ISIS as a justification for his many actions in front of international actors.”

Continuing to push Islamic movements into a corner could backfire. Parviz Mullodjanov, a political scientist in Tajikistan, said in an interview to Fergana News Agency that the recent strife will have very negative outcomes, possibly producing a rapid change in the Islamic Renaissance party. “This means that its members will go underground and the party will change its tactics, goals and strategy. Its leader may even be replaced with a radical.”

Mullodjanov went on to make a prediction: “We can say today confidently that some young members will leave the country and join ISIS and other jihadist groups.”