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Radical Islam Challenges Central Asian Leaders

By The Moscow Times

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Women walking on a street in Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, last weekend. **Nozim Kalandarov**

TURSUNZODA, Tajikistan — Shoira Shatmanova says her 21-year-old son is embarrassed to be seen in public with her because she doesn't wear an Islamic headscarf.

Born and raised when Tajikistan was part of the Soviet Union, she feels increasingly like an outsider in her own land.

Her fear, like that of many in Tajikistan, is that a more radical interpretation of Islam in the Central Asian republic of 7.5 million people could prove fertile ground for homegrown militants filtering back across the border from Afghanistan.

"I'm not in any way opposed to women wearing the hijab," said Shatmanova, a 53-year-old nurse. "I will only oppose it when these women and their husbands are against people like me — and this is already happening."

Chronic poverty and a Soviet-style crackdown on religion are furthering the growth of radical Islam in parts of Central Asia.

Security analysts say Central Asian militants who have fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan could attempt to exploit political turmoil and ethnic divisions to gain a foothold in the Ferghana Valley, where three former Soviet republics intertwine.

In Kyrgyzstan, the interim government has struggled to control its volatile south since assuming power after an April revolt. Nearly 400 people were killed in savage clashes in June.

Authorities in Tajikistan, where the average monthly wage is only $80, are also on alert after the country's first suicide bombing in five years was followed by an ambush on Sunday that killed at least 25 troops en route to guard its porous borders.

"Any subversive movement will feel tempted to check out how weak the regime is," said Paul Quinn-Judge, the Bishkek-based Central Asia project director for the International Crisis Group.

Tajikistan's response this year to a heightened threat of insurgency has been to jail more than 100 members of banned groups on charges of plotting to overthrow the government.

President Emomali Rakhmon has recently criticized the growing fashion among women to eschew national costume in favor of the hijab and has urged parents to withdraw their children from religious schools abroad, saying they would become "terrorists."

Tajikistan's government said foreign Islamist militants, including mercenaries from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Chechnya, were responsible for the ambush in the Rasht Valley and also blamed warlords with whom it fought a civil war in the 1990s.

By focusing attention on his former civil war opponents, Rakhmon has ignored the roots of a new Islamist militancy, said Christopher Langton, an independent regional specialist.

"Rakhmon, encouraged by his Russian advisers, is content to follow a Soviet approach, which is heavy-handed and unlikely to address the real reasons for growing militancy," Langton said.

"The seeds are sown in the unemployed young who have grown up since the Tajik civil war and who see the way their parents have been repressed," he said. "These 'young' are energized by the ongoing insurgencies in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

Orkhan Jemal, a Moscow-based analyst who has written about the region, said Tajikistan faces a dilemma: to ally with Russia, which helped Rakhmon win the civil war, or to appeal to U.S. and British fears of a spreading Islamist insurgency.

"I have the feeling that Russia will not be involved in aiding Tajikistan in the same way it did in the 1990s," he said, citing the Kremlin's reluctance to send troops to Kyrgyzstan.

"On the other hand, you have the United States and its coalition fighting in Afghanistan, who feel huge unease over the rapid Islamization of yet another country in the region," he said.

One threat to the region would be the return of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, an al-Qaida-linked militant group whose exiled members have spent years fighting in Afghanistan.

The group last month announced a new leader, Usman Adil, to replace Tahir Yuldashev, who was killed in August 2009 by a U.S. drone missile near the Pakistani-Afghan border.

"As long as they do not announce that they have shifted plans to focus on Central Asia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will be sideshows for them," Quinn-Judge said. "Should, however, the IMU switch its strategy and declare all-out war in Central Asia, we would have a totally new situation on our hands."

Khoji Akbar Turajonzoda, once a deputy leader of the Tajik United Opposition that fought against the government, does not believe that there will be another civil war in Tajikistan. But the former supreme mufti said many Muslims have grown disaffected.

"No matter the problem, Islamists get the blame," he said. "This only makes heroes of those who bring no good."

Turajonzoda said he would support a secular state in the style of Malaysia, Indonesia or India.

"I am not a supporter of Islamization," he said. "I'm a supporter of a secular, but not an anti-religious, Tajikistan. Unfortunately, people here equate 'secular' with 'anti-religious.'"

Wearing the hijab in schools and colleges is forbidden.

Shatmanova, however, said she swaps her Western fashion for conservative dress when visiting her parents in a low-rise district of her hometown, Tursunzoda, 50 kilometers west of Dushanbe.

She said she pretended to observe the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan this year for fear of scorn from her work colleagues.

"Many people have left the republic," she said. "Not only Russians, from whom we inherited many of our traditional ways, but secular Tajiks and Uzbeks, who have left in search of good jobs, decent education and a better life."

Her eldest daughter is among them.

"She left for Moscow five years ago. She married a Russian. I'm very glad she can wear what she likes. She's a free person."

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