

Tajik Leader Orders Mosque Crackdown

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DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon instructed his security services on Friday to tighten control over religious education and mosques, which he said were often used to foment religious radicalism in the Central Asian state.

Rakhmon was speaking two days after the main opposition Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan censured the secular government of the majority Muslim state, accusing it of corruption and trampling on religious and political rights.

Rakhmon, whose ruling People's Democratic Party has rejected these charges, said the unchecked proliferation of mosques and religious schools posed a major threat to stability in the country of 7.5 million.

"Under the guise of teaching the basics of Islam, criminals recruit teenagers and young people to their ranks and then send them to extremist religious schools in Islamic states," Rakhmon told a meeting of Tajikistan's Security Council.

"Some mosques are giving the floor to those who propagate extremist ideology and are turning into places for recruiting youths to the ranks of extremists," he said.

Tajikistan, the poorest of five former Soviet republics in Central Asia, fought a civil war between 1992 and 1997 in which tens of thousands were killed. The Islamic Revival Party formed the core of the alliance that fought against the government.

The opposition's unprecedented strong statement and Rakhmon's riposte, in which he said militant Islamists were gaining a foothold in rural areas, underscore the fragile peace in a nation where the average monthly wage is \$80.

Critics of the government say crackdowns on believers and abject poverty drive many young people to radical Islam. Others say an Egypt-style revolt is unlikely because many young men — the key population group for protest — can find jobs in Russia and Kazakhstan, and memories of the civil war are fresh.

Rakhmon said the number of mosques in Tajikistan exceeded the number of secondary schools and included 1,250 "illegal" mosques that had not officially been registered.

He said the State National Security Committee, successor to the KGB, was not doing enough to control the spread of militant Islam and called on it "to purge its ranks of random people who discredit the honor of their service."

Authorities in Tajikistan jailed more than 100 members of banned groups last year, while Rakhmon also criticized what he sees as a growing trend among women to wear religious clothing.

For the last several months, government troops have been fighting a group of insurgents in the country's east. Officials say the rebels, who claimed responsibility for a September ambush on a military convoy, are linked to al-Qaida.

The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, which has more than 40,000 members, wants religion to play a bigger role in public life, but has not made demands for an Islamic state. Some party members have identified Malaysia as a model they would like to emulate.

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