

Tajikistan Hunts Renegade Minister After Clashes Stir Instability

September 07, 2015



A panorama of Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Tajikistan said it had arrested 14 members of a criminal group loyal to the country's sacked deputy defense minister in a special operation on Monday, following bloody gun battles that have stoked fears of religious-related unrest.

A poor Muslim nation of 8 million in Central Asia, Tajikistan remains volatile after a 1992-97 civil war that killed tens of thousands of people. Tensions between its secular, pro-Moscow government and the Islamist opposition are on the rise.

Instability in the ex-Soviet state is a source of concern to Russia and the United States who fear militant Islam could take root there because of its proximity to Afghanistan, though there has been limited evidence of that so far.

At the center of the latest crisis is General Abdukhalim Nazarzoda, a former rebel and the country's deputy defense minister until Friday, when gunmen loyal to him clashed with

government forces in circumstances that have not been fully explained. Nine police officers and 13 rebels died in the clashes, the police said.

The authorities have suggested Nazarzoda belonged to an Islamist political party; the party has denied that.

On Monday, the interior ministry said it had arrested 14 associates of Nazarzoda and confiscated a large cache of weapons in an isolated gorge outside Dushanbe, the capital.

"The operation to liquidate Nazarzoda's terrorist group is continuing," the ministry said in a statement.

As of late Monday, the general remained at large.

The violence appears connected to a clampdown on political Islam by President Imomali Rakhmon, the former head of a Soviet collective farm, who has ruled since 1992 and tolerates no dissent.

Rakhmon sacked Nazarzoda on Friday after the violence, accusing him of committing an unspecified crime. The authorities later accused Nazarzoda of belonging to the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT).

The IRPT, which denied that Nazarzoda is a member, is in the government's crosshairs.

The government told the party at the end of August its activities were illegal, as its branches in 58 cities and districts had ceased to exist, meaning it had no right to call itself a nationwide political force.

It ordered its main office in Dushanbe shuttered.

The IRPT said in a statement at the time its branches had been forced to close by officials. It bowed to a government edict however and cancelled a congress planned for this month.

Professor Alexander Knyazev, a Kazakhstan-based Central Asia analyst, said the government's campaign against the IRPT risked backfiring.

"The IRPT, acting as a legal political force, had served as a lightning rod [for dissent], deflecting radical Islam," Knyazev told Reuters.

"Its closure and official pressure on its members is likely to push many pious Muslims out

of officially registered mosques into underground ones," he said, warning that this could stoke Islamist radicalism.

Tajikistan is due to celebrate its independence day on Wednesday, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose country maintains a military base in Tajikistan, is expected to visit Dushanbe later this month.

Putin told President Rakhmon in a phone call over the weekend that the latest violence was "an attempt to destabilize the country's internal situation" and expressed his support for the Tajik leadership, Russian news agencies quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying.

Rakhmon already faced embarrassment earlier this year when the U.S.-trained commander of the country's special forces declared himself a member of Islamic State, the violent Sunni Islamist group based in Syria and Iraq.

Knyazev said the risk with Tajikistan was that its borders were so porous that instability from Afghanistan or Pakistan could seep into the country and begin to spread across the post-Soviet space.

"Just look at a map," he said. "And it's clear why the situation is precarious."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/09/07/tajikistan-hunts-renegade-minister-after-clashes-stir-in-stability-a49404>