

**TAJIKISTAN: MUTINY OF THE RENEGADE GENERAL NAZARZODA DEMONSTRATES INCREASING CHALLENGES FOR THE STABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT OF EMMOMALI RAKHMON**

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A mutiny, launched by the renegade general Nazarzoda and his followers on September 4, that resulted in series of attacks against police posts and was followed by a large-scale search raid in Romit gorge, demonstrates that, nearly 2 decades after the end of civil war, Tajikistan today is again on the brink of a new armed conflict.

To recall, early in the morning on September 4 a group of gunmen launched a coordinated attack against a police office in the town of Vakhdat, situated in some 20 kilometers from the Tajik capital Dushanbe, killing 4 policemen. During the attack, other assailants managed to seize large amounts of weapons and ammunition and escaped from the scene. Several hours later another group of gunmen attacked a security checkpoint in Dushanbe, killing 3 security officers. According to official reports of the Tajik Interior Ministry, 17 people were killed in the two attacks, while Russian media, quoting anonymous sources in Tajik Defense Ministry, claimed that some 33 security troops were killed.

In an attempt to prevent further destabilisation of the security situation, authorities blocked Facebook, YouTube and Russian social media service Odnoklassniki and also halted the system that sends SMS across the country. The US Embassy was closed and warned that the clashes "may be precursors to other acts of violence".

The Defense Ministry blamed the attacks on a "terrorist group" led by Major General Abdulkhalim Mirzo Nazarzoda, the deputy Defence Minister, who was dismissed later on Friday by President Emomali Rakhmon with the vague explanation 'for committing crimes'.

According to Tajik official sources, Abdulkhalim Mirzo Nazarzoda aka Khodzha Khalim was reportedly a member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) that the government shut down last week and was as well a former senior member of United Tajik Opposition (UTO) during the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992-1997. According to the peace agreement on 27 June 1997, he joined military forces of Tajikistan. In January 2014, he was appointed as deputy Defense Minister of Tajikistan.

Following the attacks in Dushanbe and Vakhdat, a large-scale security operation was launched in Romit Gorge, some 45 km east of Dushanbe, where Nazardoda along sheltered with some 135 members of the air assault battalion of the Defense Ministry of Tajikistan.

On Monday, September 14, Tajik authorities announced that so far some 130 followers of Nazarzoda were detained by security troops during ongoing search operations in Romit gorge and another 20 were shot dead.

Two senior security officers, colonel Mustafu Nazarzoda, brother of the mutiny leader, deputy head of air assault brigade of Defense Ministry, and Nasim Youssoufov, senior inspector of financial department of Defence ministry, were detained for alleged links to the attacks in Dushanbe and Vakhdat. They were allegedly informed about the mutiny plot of Mirzo Nazarzoda prior to it but did not revealed this information to security authorities.

It should be taken into account that reports on the incident in Tajik media were very limited and main information on the situation were presented mainly by official sources. While most of reports in Tajik media refer to the incident as an 'act of terrorism', numerous independent security experts prefer to qualify it as a 'mutiny' or even a 'coup attempt'.

The latest developments demonstrate that following 2 decades of a relative calm Tajikistan today is again on the brink of a new wave of insurgency.

The attacks, that were classified by Tajik authorities as 'terrorist acts' can be considered de-facto as a mutiny and as a reaction from members of Islamic opposition, namely Islamic Renaissance Party, to the recent intensification of governmental crackdown against opposition groups. To recall, on July 9 the Tajik Prosecutor General's Office announced that the IRP was no longer a political party, because the branches of the party were "not present" in the majority of regions of Tajikistan. The statement came just days after the political council of the Islamic Renaissance Party addressed an open letter to President Emomali Rakhmon calling him to intervene due to numerous cases of harassment of party members by governmental authorities. On August 28, the Tajik Justice Ministry gave the IRP ten days to close down, just days after its national and local headquarters had been shut.

Today the exact motives and demands of Nazarzoda and his followers still remain unclear. Some experts consider that he probably expected that the campaign against the IRP and other opposition groups would sooner or later target him in person, in a similar move to the one against other high-profile Tajik personalities, who took part in the Civil War siding with opposition, then joined forces of Emmomali Rahmon, but in recent years were put in prison for involvement in war-period insurgency.

Many experts indicate that today's situation is similar to one at the beginning of 1990s, when opposition between the government and Islamist opposition parties had led to a phase of open field clashes, triggering a 5-year-long civil war. Following the end of civil war some of Islamic opposition warlords were reintegrated in the government of Emmomali Rakhmon, while others sheltered in Gorno-Badakhshan region making it an almost autonomous territory, where central governmental authorities have a very low level of support among local population. For decades the

region is de facto administered by former warlords was considered as a hotbed of weapon and drug trafficking and other criminal activities. So far any attempt of the governmental authorities to impose a crackdown on criminal networks in the region have faced a fierce resistance from local population and the opposition warlords, resulting in violent clashes.

In the latest outbreak of violence in June 2012, deadly clashes between security troops and warlords in Khorog valley left dozens killed. The violence erupted as Tajik security forces took action to neutralize the group led by armed opposition leader Tolibek Ayembekov, deputy head of the border guards division, allegedly implicated in the death of General Abdullo Nazarov. After the end of the operation, security authorities announced that 30 terrorists and 12 security officers were killed in the fighting. Independent media and local activists said that the real number of casualties was as high as 150. Ayembekov surrendered to Tajik authorities.

These facts demonstrate, that Islamist opposition over the last decades always remained an important security challenge for Tajikistan. Meanwhile, as ESISC already mentioned in its previous analytical notes, Tajikistan today is also facing an increasing threat of Islamist terrorism, presented by the growing number and scale of domestic terrorist cells but also by an increasing inflow of jihadists returning after waging jihad in Syria. More than 250 Tajik citizens are estimated to be fighting alongside jihadists in Syria.

To recall, several months ago the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, one of the main radical Islamist movements in Central Asia, which counts a lot of Tajik nationals among its ranks, officially pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State, further reinforcing IS positions in the region.

But the most dramatic fact, demonstrating the scale of pro-Islamist opposition within the security forces, was the pledge of allegiance to IS on May 27, of Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, Chief of Special Forces (Special Purpose Police Unit) of the Tajik Interior Ministry. In his online video statement, Khalimov admitted that he joined the group because of a broad anti-Islamic campaign of the Tajik Interior Ministry, adding that he would return to Tajikistan with "jihad".

In the contemporary security context, situation in Tajikistan is even more 'favorable' to the new civil war than two decades ago.

However, unlike in 1992, today the Kremlin clearly expressed its position regarding the incidents in Dushanbe and Vahdat. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, Vladimir Putin got in touch with the Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, and assured him that in case of escalation of the conflict he could count on military assistance from Russia. Taking into account the increasing Russian military presence in Syria, the possibility of a military involvement of Russian troops in a crackdown on Islamist armed opposition in Tajikistan cannot be ruled out.

During the first decade after the end of civil war, Tajik President Emmomali Rakhmon attempted to avoid a direct confrontation with opposition leaders, notably by reintegrating them at some key positions in the government. Meanwhile the policy, implemented by Rakhmon in recent year clearly indicates that he would not support anymore Islamist opposition in Tajikistan.

Following the deadly attacks in Dushanbe and Vahdat, Tajik authorities are expected to intensify further the crackdown on Islamist opposition to prevent any other mutiny attempts. However, in such context, the intention of President Emmomali Rakhmon to build a 'power vertical' within the government is increasingly challenged by growing spectrum of domestic Islamist opposition and by the increasing presence of Islamic State in the country, which could turn any other mutiny attempt into a new wave of a full-scale civil war.

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