



View Point

Violence in Tajikistan: Causes and Impact

*Dr. Athar Zafar **

Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAP) is once again disturbed. The chief of the province's State Committee for National Security – successor to the Soviet-era KGB – General Abdullo Nazarov, 56, was reportedly stabbed to death on 21 July 2012 in Khorog, the region's capital. The Tajik authorities accused Tolib Ayombekov, the general's deputy and a local strongman, to be involved in the killing. Though he surrendered on 13 August, he denied the charges. The 46-year-old Ayombekov was opposition fighter during the Tajikistan civil war 1992-97; he was accommodated in the government as a political reconciliation measure. He is the brother of Abdulamon Ayombekov, who was killed while fighting against the government during the civil war.

Citing the reasons that the accused had refused to surrender or cooperate with the investigation, the government launched an offensive on 24 July, leading to the death of more than 40 people, including over a dozen security personnel. The government claims that many suspects, including eight Afghans, have also been detained. However, unconfirmed reports suggest that the number of deaths is much higher and many civilians may have also died. Dushanbe says that the situation is becoming normal and the 'rebels' are handing over arms to the authorities after the government's announcement of amnesty.

Gorno-Badakhshan (locally known as Pamir) region roughly covers 45 per cent of Tajikistan's territory but is home to less than four per cent of the country's 7.6 million population. It borders Afghanistan, and the contiguous province in

Afghanistan is called as Badakhshan. Pamir also shares boundary with China's Xinjiang autonomous region and the Kyrgyz Republic. Gorno-Badakhshan is different from mainland Tajikistan in more than one ways; it is primarily a Shi'a dominated area and majority of them are Isma'ili Shi'as while Tajikistan is a Sunni majority country. The lingua franca is Tajiki but Pamiri people speak different languages such as Yaghnobi, Roshani and Ishkashemi.

The killing, in which the victim is a Tajik and the accused are Pamiri, might be an immediate reason for the government undertaking the security operation but other factors also appear to be at work. The political and economic relationship between Dushanbe and GBAP has not been smooth. Given the geographical distance from the centre and difficult topography, the Pamiris feel isolated from the mainstream Tajik consciousness.

Badakhshan has been a source of precious stones such as lapis lazuli since the Harappan days and the region is known to have huge mineral deposits. But it has largely been backward economically; majority of the Gorno-Badakhshan workforce migrates to Russia seeking employment opportunities. Further, high rate of unemployment and poverty results in drug smuggling and radical activities. Due to poverty, corruption and autocratic rule, many young people tend to see Islamic ideology as a solution. Tajik leaders are particularly concerned about suspected links between the people involved in the violence, especially the Afghans, and the elements from the Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or the Al Qa'idah in Afghanistan.

The GBAP was created in 1925 during the Soviet period and since then it has enjoyed relative autonomy from the centre. The imminent drawdown of Western forces from Afghanistan by 2014 is another worry for Dushanbe. During the civil war (1992-97), the region had emerged as a base for the Islamist-led opposition forces and Tajikistan is apprehensive that the same can be repeated if a power vacuum is created in Kabul. Hence, Dushanbe is trying to gain full control over the region to forestall any untoward outcomes from the developments in Afghanistan. It can be considered a kind of show of strength by the central authority. Thus, besides catching the accused, this operation also seems to have political objectives.

Drug trafficking is a major problem in the porous Afghanistan-Tajikistan border in the GBAP. The region lies on lucrative opium trade route from Afghanistan

to Kyrgyzstan and further to Kazakhstan and Russia. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, about 25 per cent of the drugs produced in Afghanistan pass through Central Asia, and much of it through the GBAP. The scale of opium trade is such that it is hard to believe that they are carried out without the knowledge of the authorities. Tajik Prosecutor-General's office has already indicated that the general's killing might be related to illegal smugglings in the region. Tajik authorities claim that former opposition fighters and commanders are involved in drug smuggling. Officials claim that Ayombekov took over the position of the head of the border guards of Ishkashim Rayon (district) bordering Afghanistan by force in order to control legal and illegal trade. Ayombekov was among the opposition fighters, who continue to wield local influence and defy the central authority.

The situation appears to remain under control and there is no likely threat of civil war revisiting the country. Using the opportunity, Dushanbe seems to be asserting its authority over the region. But the incident also highlights the region's fragility and delicate relations with the centre.

India is making substantial investments in neighbouring Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. It needs to keep a close eye on developments across the border.

** Dr. Athar Zafar, Research Fellow, at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi 110001*

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