



Tajikistan's marginalised youth

Sophie Roche, 20th October 2010

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Armed conflict has been raging for almost a month in the mountains of the Kamarob gorge between the forces of the Government of Tajikistan and local 'mujohids'. This is the most serious political violence in Tajikistan for ten years. Here, in the second of a two-part article, Sophie Roche and John Heathershaw draw on ethnographic research and contacts with residents of the region to explain the nature of contemporary 'Islamic radicalism' in the area and the possible causes and dynamics of the current violence.

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Islam and Islamism

In Kamarob, Islamic education is central to every person, whether man or woman. Most young people have received a basic religious education, which consists of learning the Arabic alphabet and reading the basics of hanafi law. An increased number of educated scholars are emerging from the region, participating in competitions and conducting religious gatherings.

The Friday sermon of the central mosque in Gharm is relayed to the surrounding villages of Kamarob and the Rasht valley. The central and village mosques of Rasht have been built entirely by donations from the population. Migrants are the most important actors in promoting Islam, not as an ideology but through their material support. They will bring a gift to the mosque after a successful stay in Russia in the form of a meal, building materials or money. Many villages by now have wonderful mosques that can host several hundred people. These are entirely financed by migrants.

However, such gifts affect only the public sphere of men. This public sphere has been 'Islamized' as villagers have begun to build a two-metre high stone wall to make sure that women are kept safe from any stranger's view. This is one of various gendering activities under the banner of Islam. For instance, sisters are taken out of school at their brother's request.



Women laugh and joke at weddings and other occasions, trying to make the best of their often difficult situation. Many young migrants opt for weddings at which there is a female dancer, alcohol and loud music. Others Islamize the weddings of their children. Dependent on male relatives, women have adopted coping strategies to keep the peace.

But this general Islamicisation of society does not necessarily lead to higher standards of Islamic education. Local women distinguish between men who use Islam to claim masculine power over women on the one hand and well educated religious authorities on the other. Most young men who joined the mujohid groups during the war were not well-educated in Islam, but simply recruited to fight alongside their kin and neighbours.

The so-called mujohidi islom were those fighters who operated against the government during the civil war. Some groups – and this includes the remilitarised group of Ali – pray regularly and insist on proper behaviour. Other groups formed during the war made use of drugs and ‘lack moral codes’ in the eyes of a fighter from Ali’s group. There are a variety of such formations which continue to operate under the banner of Islam. However, few remain militarized and few may be considered Islamist.

Networks and factions

Despite their differences of conviction and practice, these mujohidi groups cooperated during the civil war against the common enemy of pro-governmental militias and troops. Shahrigul provided fighters, although many mothers went to the mountains to bring back sons who had run away to join the mujohids. These young men joined the group of Ali, who is said to control Kamarob.

As a rather large group, Ali’s group was well-organized and disciplined. The few women members were either wives or sisters. Besides local residents, during the civil war the group also included refugees who had been chased away from the regions of the south and even some foreigners. According to its members, Ali was a fair person, very strict in learning discipline amongst his fighters



rather than been defeated. Such fighters feel dishonoured and threatened when government troops enter Kamarob for conscription and security purposes. Such exercises of central power challenge local people's sense of sovereignty.

Tensions in Rasht

Following the peace agreement, former fighters were reintegrated into government organs. In this way some groups and individuals remained armed and in power. In fact when the female teacher was killed in 2002 such factionalism became visible again: the head of Gharm district (the Raisi Hukumat), who was a foreigner to the region, appointed by the President, was unable to function.

The district was forced to accept the authority of a special unit known as the 6th *adel* in Gharm and its leader, [Mirzokhoja Ahmadov](#) [12], another former civil war commander on the side of the opposition. This faction not only sought to provide security but also what it deemed proper Islamic moral rules. Women who misbehaved were punished and there was even a ban on the free circulation of alcohol and cigarettes.

Thus, the rapprochement between the central government and the mujohids was contingent on a mutual understanding of lines that could not be crossed. Government attempts to arrest Ahmadov in 2008 were taken as a challenge by the former mujohids and led to the death of a senior commander, Oleg Zakarchenko, in a shoot-out in Garm. If Ahmadov's men lost their positions, they would lose their status and income – reason enough to act politically and militarily.

A further underlying reason for the conflict may lie in the natural resources that were found in Hoid, a village some way further up the valley from Gharm. Several years ago coal was found here and sold solely to people from the region. The Government of Tajikistan, in constant need of energy, identified the coal as a national resource. However, the area was controlled by mujohids who made it very difficult for the government to control the area.

Compulsory military service is another source of tension. This has become a torment for young men who face great hardships including food shortage, heavy beatings and disease during their two-year service. Many young men come back 'unable to marry' due to illness and injury. This has caused increasing resistance. To avoid service, young men are sent to Russia which, as one villager remarked, is a 'hard school as well but at least they earn some money and come back mature'.

The recent 'war'

On Sunday September 19, a group of mujohids ambushed a military vehicle in Kamarob, [killing more than 20 soldiers and officers](#). [13] The soldiers had been sent to capture some of the 25 criminals who had escaped from a Dushanbe prison in late August. Eight of them had already been killed, some have been captured and forced to denounce their relatives as 'terrorists' whilst others remain at large.

It is likely that it did not take more than few hours to bring the former network of mujohids together and to reorganize them for a successful attack on the military convoy. Local residents report that young men leave to join the mujohids every day the armed conflict goes on. Villages now resemble what they were like 'during the war' an informant claimed – emptied of men. Only women, children and the elderly remain.



Emomali Rahmon, president of Tajikistan



The slogan that his army is an army of peasants seems to have proved true.

Following the first event of 19 September, it turned out that among the people killed were conscripts of no more than 18 or 19 years old. They barely knew how to handle weapons when they were sent to capture well-trained and experienced mujohid fighters. The slogan that '[Rakhmon's](#) [14] army is an army of peasants' seems to have proved true – boys of poor families unable to send their sons for work overseas or to hide them from forced conscription faced hardened fighters and their new recruits.

Since 19 September, residents report that thousands of troops – perhaps more than 10,000 – have entered the Rasht valley. Further casualties have been sustained on both sides. Whilst figures for mujohid deaths and injuries are unknown, at least five were killed in an attack on Ahmadov's home.

On 6 October, a military helicopter crashed with the loss of 26 national guard and special operations soldiers. Although the crash was officially declared an accident, local residents report that it was caused by mujohid fire. The unambiguous truth is impossible to ascertain and may never come out.

Locals coming from the region have reported a heavy military presence at the gateway to Kamarob and no way for local residents to leave and enter the area. Recently, the blockage has been partially lifted to allow food in. Some residents have taken the opportunity to leave. But communications have been cut and the state has attempted to suppress versions of events that differ from the official.

The latest information from Kamarob through unofficial channels indicates that an opportunity for compromise may now be emerging. Following the death of Ahmadov's father, on 13 October, approximately 300 mujohids came down from the mountains to pay him their respects (janosa). State forces did not impede their travel and one official has apparently suggested a peace.

Disinformation and marginalization

However and whenever this armed conflict ends, one of the consequences of the renewed violence is once more to disrupt the social order in Kamarob. There is no neutrality in this conflict – at least not for young men. Women in the region generally condemn any side, whether mujohids or state military actors, and this is also true for elderly men. By contrast, young men often feel bound to take sides in defence of their family and village reputation.

The fighting has created an atmosphere where all residents of Kamarob are suspected of collusion, and all men considered potentially criminals, Islamists or terrorists. This galvanizes the militants. One informant claims that fathers have taken their sons to join the mujohids or to hide in a cave to escape a military raid on their village.

Young people from the region are seen as a potential threat to the regime, so they become objects of government control. Informants say that, on hearing the news of military activities in the region, some students from Dushanbe resolved to join the mujohids. Local youths have long ago either joined them or left for Russia.

In sharp contrast to this narrative of local resistance to governmental control, the Tajik information agency claims that foreign forces are fighting on Tajik soil and that the military operation is a struggle against international terrorism. Some foreigners probably did fight in Ali's group during the civil war, but it is unlikely that many of the combatants in the recent violence were foreign citizens or fighting for regional Islamist causes.

If it is highly unlikely that the conflict in Kamarob is part of a regional Islamist struggle it is just as improbable that it is part of a national uprising against the state. The evidence indicates that local commanders in Rasht acted autonomously against the government as they felt threatened by the further incursion of the Dushanbe government into their region.



Sophie Roche and John Heathershaw

Meanwhile people take their information from informal sources as the official version is deemed misleading. Instead of discussing the conflict, state television reports the future development promised by Chinese road building and shows videos taken some time ago to demonstrate that all is calm in Rasht. Rumours continue to abound of people killed, rapes by state soldiers and houses bombed, increasing anger among both sides instead of clarifying anything.

If it is highly unlikely that the conflict in Kamarob is part of a regional Islamist struggle it is just as improbable that it is part of a national uprising against the state. The evidence indicates that local commanders in Rasht acted autonomously against the government as they felt threatened by the further incursion of the Dushanbe government into their region. The political opposition in Dushanbe neither agreed with, nor supported the conflict. Indeed, [the Islamic Renaissance Party](#) [15] will likely be harmed as a result of these events as the Government implies connections between them and foreign terrorists.

The manipulation of information and the labelling of political activists is a powerful tool in the hand of the government. There has, however, been some brave reporting from independent journalists who have consequently been threatened by the government. The international press in turn must subject official information to critical scrutiny, questioning the legitimacy and consequences of such military operations in the light of the injustices and unresolved tensions of post-war Tajikistan.

The armed conflict in Rasht is not an attack by foreign Islamic terrorists. It was prompted by an ill-equipped government response to a jail-break in Dushanbe and is a military struggle against state forces by local 'mujohids' and their young male recruits. These new recruits have emerged from decades of social and political marginalization. These exclusions must be addressed if conflict is to be resolved and further violence avoided.

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Sideboxes'**Read On'** Sidebox:

[The Tajik civil war: causes and dynamics](#) [16], by Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes (March 2001), Reconciliation Resources web site

www.fergana.ru [17] (in Russian and in English)

<http://www.eurasianet.org/>

[Tajikistan country profile](#) [18], BBC

[Tajikistan. Through a Caring Lens](#) [19], photo essay, 24 Sept, 2010 Mercy Corps web site

[Tajikistan page](#) [20] on Mercy Corps web site

[Tajikistan Unlikely to Be Test Case for Russia-led Security Group.](#) [21] European Dialogue XXI web site, 8 Oct., 2010

Sidebox:

Tajik Civil War:

In the early 1990s, as the forces that once held together the Soviet Union began to



dissolve, political competition and conflict began to escalate in Tajikistan, the far south-eastern republic of the USSR. Shortly after independence was declared in September 1991, the struggle for state power played out more or less peacefully, albeit with frequent public demonstrations in the capital, Dushanbe. Nine presidential candidates contested the first multi-party elections, which were won by a former leader of the Communist Party. Yet a popular consensus on the legitimacy of his presidency remained elusive. Tension between supporters of the government and the opposition parties intensified to the point where different factions took up weapons. Less than a year after independence, Tajikistan was engulfed in civil war.

Between 20,000 and 60,000 people were killed in the first year of fighting when the war was at its peak, with most commentators judging that about 50,000 lives were lost between May and December 1992. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 600,000 people - about one-tenth of the population - were internally displaced and at least 80,000 sought refuge outside the country, mostly in Afghanistan.

Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, Reconciliation Resources

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[13] <http://enews.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=1857>

[14] <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1900448,00.html>



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