

Violence In Tajikistan's Badakhshan Province A Legacy Of Civil War

Government forces have recently clashed with armed groups in Tajikistan's remote Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, a mountainous region along the Afghan border that has existed largely outside Dushanbe's control for decades. RFE/RL's Robert Coalson takes a quick look at Badakhshan and the wider impact of unrest there.

Relatively few people have heard of Tajikistan's Badakhshan region. Why is it important?

Badakhshan is an isolated, mountainous region of southeastern Tajikistan that shares a long and virtually open border with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China. The region has considerable mineral wealth and is also a corridor for illegal trafficking in cigarettes, alcohol, and narcotics -- particularly Afghan heroin.

It has a population of about 250,000, most of whom belong to the Pamiri ethnic group and are Shi'ite Muslims of the Ismaili sect. Tajikistan is a Sunni-majority country.

Badakhshan lies several hundred kilometers from the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, and is isolated by rugged mountain terrain. It has been largely de facto autonomous since Tajikistan became independent in 1991. The borders in the area were patrolled by Russian troops until the Tajik government asked them to leave in 2005.

Tajikistan is considered a weak state that is potentially vulnerable to destabilizing influences that could come across the border from Afghanistan as the NATO-led international coalition there draws down its combat forces in 2014. This is a matter of considerable concern to both Moscow and Beijing.

The larger neighborhood powers have long had serious concerns about security in the region. Omar Ashour, who teaches Middle East studies at the University of Exeter, notes that Russia intervened heavily to end the Tajik Civil War in 1997 because of concerns that the fragile country could be undermined by the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

He says the government remains weak, unreformed, and lacks popular support. "You have a government that is not giving any signs of reform or transparency or turning away from corruption. It runs the country almost like an organized-crime syndicate," Ashour said.

The Tajik government says it has been fighting "militants" in Badakhshan. Who are these militants and what is motivating them -- is it religious, ethnic, economic?

Although the Pamiri who populate Badakhshan are ethnically and religiously different from northern Tajiks, the main drivers of the current conflict are clashing economic and power interests that are the unresolved legacy of the Tajik Civil War. Although fighting in that conflict ended in 1997, the central government has been continuing to settle things with former opposition figures, including many that were brought into power structures following the end of the fighting.

Paul Quinn Judge, acting Asia program director of the International Crisis Group, sees the current violence as a legacy of Tajikistan's civil war.

"The pattern was after the civil war, in many places, to give local guerrilla commanders -- commanders of the United Tajik Opposition, that is -- positions in their home which would allow them to wield substantial political, administrative, and economic clout," Quinn Judge said. "The current targets of the government's operation seems to fall very much within that mold."

In Badakhshan, the government is targeting a former opposition commander named Talib Ayombekov, who was given a post in the Interior Ministry and later with the border guards. The fighting was sparked by the July 21 killing of Abdullo Nazarov, who was also an opposition commander during the civil war, but who later was made chairman of the Directorate of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security (KGB) in Badakhshan.

Ashour notes that both men are from the country's Sunni majority and have relatively little support among the local population.

How is NATO's plan to withdraw troops from Afghanistan a factor in Badakhshan?

Although the Badakhshan violence is a purely internal matter, it is not isolated from the events in Afghanistan. Quinn Judge argues that the developing withdrawal from Afghanistan is already increasing tensions in the area.

"The beginning of the drawdown is already making people nervous. Those living around Afghanistan, those with a stake in Afghanistan," Quinn Judge said. "And what is happening in Badakhshan right now, which could have long-lasting repercussions, is bound to make players like China and the U.S. extremely nervous in the long run."

The University of Exeter's Ashour also argues that the emerging security vacuum is fraught with danger for Tajikistan.

"I think what the NATO departure will do is just make all the major players in Tajikistan think that they can expand their influence without having some big brother in the neighborhood intervene to empower one side or the other," Ashour said.

Ashour agrees that the recent events in Badakhshan could have dangerous, long-lasting repercussions unless the international community pays serious attention.

"Tajikistan is really on the brink at the moment and I think without some kind of international pressure to start some serious reforms in the security sector, in the military sector, and the political system, I think this country may see another cycle of heavy violence," Ashour said.

WATCH: RFE/RL's Tajik Service Director Sojida Djakhfarova explains the strategic importance of Gorno-Badakhshan

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