

# Rahmon's 'Baba Army' Strikes in Tajikistan

By Farangis Najibullah

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Tajikistan's opposition leaders have accused authorities of using a group of "rent-a-crowd" women to put pressure on government opponents.

The claim follows an incident earlier this week in which some two dozen female protesters noisily disrupted a press conference of the Social Democratic Party to criticize its leader and heap praise on President Emomali Rahmon.

"Rent-a-crowd" suspicions were further aroused when journalists recognized at least two of the women as participants in an April protest outside the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe -- and when the women denied any involvement in that rally, despite video and photo evidence.

Renting groups of women -- to stage or disrupt gatherings and even physically attack or publicly humiliate government opponents -- is a well-known practice in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. But it's been unknown so far in Tajikistan.

Such groups are referred to jokingly as "OBON" -- Special Assignment "Baba" Unit (Отряд баб особого назначения) -- "baba" being the Russian word for a formidable grandmother-type woman and "OBON" a play on Russia's OMON riot police.

At the center of the disrupted press conference on December 10 was Social Democratic Party leader Rahmatullo Zoyirov, who was speaking to the media at party headquarters about his recent trip to Kyiv and the ongoing antigovernment rallies in the Ukrainian capital.

As the presser got under way, the women burst into the room, shouting. They confronted Zoyirov and other party leaders, accusing them of seeking to destabilize the country, unlawfully challenging "popular" President Rahmon, and "not wanting peace."

The women even accused the party of being involved in the July 2012 [bloody clashes in eastern Gorno-Badakhshan](#) province, which followed the fatal stabbing of a top security official there. One of the women claimed her husband was killed in that conflict.

Social Democrats have never been linked to the Gorno-Badakhshan violence, which was widely blamed on local guerilla commanders.

The women demanded Zoyirov "let Rahmon work as he was elected by a majority of Tajikistan's citizens." They told reporters not to listen to Zoyirov's "nonsense" and said he isn't "content with peace" in Tajikistan.

Challenged by journalists at the scene, the women claimed they are "neighbors who found out about Zoyirov's meeting from the Internet."

They said they didn't know each other, and that their sudden appearance at the meeting wasn't an organized act but an expression of concern by ordinary citizens.

Journalists, however, quickly recognized some familiar faces in the crowd.

At least two of the women had taken part in a rally outside the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe in April protesting the release of a Tajik opposition figure detained in Ukraine.

At that rally, the women blamed the U.S. authorities for helping secure the release of former Tajik Prime Minister Abdumalik Abdullojonov, who has U.S. residency.

## Negative Message

The women at the Social Democrat press conference denied involvement in the April rally although videos and photos suggest otherwise.

Opposition leaders say they have long been accustomed to all kinds of pressure by authorities -- from tax officials to law-enforcement agencies and neighborhood committees.

Mahmadali Hait, deputy leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, accused the government of renting the women to disrupt the gathering.

"It sends a negative message to our political parties and civil society," Hait said.

Zoyirov said he is "considering taking the matter to court."

"The women are possibly connected to authorities," Zoyirov said. "We are planning to file a complaint to prosecutors about the incident."

In Kyrgyzstan, a group of "OBON" women -- linked to law-enforcement agencies -- beat up a government critic in 2010. According to media reports, each "OBON" members in Kyrgyzstan got paid between \$10 and \$500 depending on the type of "services" they provided.

<http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-rahmon-rent-a-crowd-women/25198610.html>