

Cops and Robbers in Tajikistan

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Showdown with alleged drug gang revives memories of civil war, but does not herald renewed violence. This was no ordinary arrest – the police officers sent in to capture Suhrob Langariev and his group of alleged drug smugglers in southern Tajikistan were armed to the teeth and backed up by armoured vehicles.

They were right to come well-prepared for the May 27 operation, as the group of men holed up in Langariev's two-storey home in the city of Kulob (also known as Kulyab) proceeded to put up a ferocious ten-hour fight, which left one captain in the security service and two civilians dead.

In the end, special forces managed to storm the building and arrest Langariev and eight others, including two Afghan nationals. Police seized an impressive arsenal of weaponry including Kalashnikov rifles, grenade launchers, satellite communications and radio equipment.

The National Security Committee or GKNB, which led the operation, appeared to be well pleased with the outcome. In a statement issued the following day, it said Langariev was believed to head one of the organised crime networks in Tajikistan that ferry heroin over the nearby border from Afghanistan and dispatch it onwards to markets in Russia and beyond. His group consisted of both Tajik and Afghan nationals, it said.

The capture of an alleged drug kingpin is a major coup in itself, in a country whose long, often inaccessible and poorly policed border with Afghanistan makes it an important transit route for heroin traffickers.

Opium production in Afghanistan has seen substantial annual growth since the fall of the Taleban regime in 2001, and the heroin processed from it is shipped out via Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia.

The lucrative trade – both transit and some local distribution within Tajikistan – has had a distorting effect on the economy of this impoverished country, not to mention the impact on health.

However, analysts note that as well as being a success in the war against crime, the Kulob clash has political ramifications, with threads leading back to Tajikistan's bloody civil war which lasted from 1992 to 1997.

Langariev's brother, Langari Langariev, was a prominent commander in the Popular Front, a paramilitary group which brought the current president, Imomali Rahmon, to power. The Popular Front, like Rahmon and his political allies, was rooted in the Kulob region. The "Kulob faction's" main opponents in this highly regionalised conflict was the Islamic Rebirth Party, IRP, whose support base was strongest in the mountains of eastern Tajikistan.

The Popular Front's leader, Sangak Safarov, was killed in 1993. His son Nurmahmad Safarov, 22, was among the nine men arrested on May 27.

The peace deal reached in 1997 brought about the demobilisation of the various armed groups on both sides of the conflict, leaving only the regular military. Since then, Rahmon's administration has sporadically targeted and neutralised any remnant units that refused to disarm – both those affiliated with the IRP and his own former Popular Front allies.

In recent years, the scale and frequency of such confrontations has diminished.

In February, men loyal to Mirzohoja Ahmadov, a former opposition guerrilla leader now serving in the local police in the mountain town of Garm, were involved in a shootout with another force of police who had apparently been dispatched from the capital to capture him. One of the commanders of the Dushanbe force was killed in the firefight. **Murder Invokes Ghosts of Tajikistan's Past**, RCA No. 533, 20-Feb-08.)

The same month, there was an incident in another remote mountain region, Badakhshan, when a former opposition commander, Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, opened fire on a police station. There were no casualties, and Mamadbokirov and his men surrendered their weapons.

In both these cases, the authorities seem to have decided not to mount a major follow-up operation – Ahmadov and Mamadbokirov are still at large.

The Kulob operation reflects a much tougher line, which some analysts say is because Langariev was seen as a greater threat to stability, due to his political heritage as well as his alleged role in drug-smuggling.

Local people told IWPR that despite being on the wanted list since 2002, Langariev had lived quite openly in his home town, and even visited Dushanbe on several occasions.

The Langariev family carried a lot of weight in Kulob, with two of Suhrob's brothers still serving as senior policemen, and the other decorated posthumously for his role as a Popular Front commander in the early stages of the war.

Analysts say the decision to eliminate Suhrob Langariev's group shows that the Rahmon administration will not tolerate groups that challenge the state, even if they are former allies.

"Events in Kulob show that the state has increased its capacity and is quite determined to pursue to its conclusion its war against non-institutional centres of influence that seek to compete with it," political expert Rashid Abdullo told IWPR.

“The time of the field commanders is past. Those who’ve been unable to adapt to the new political realities have now got problems.”

Another analyst, Parviz Mullojanov believes the operation mounted against the Langariev group was conducted in a “deliberately demonstrative and unusually public” manner.

He speculated that this show of force might reflect a period of political turbulence within the regime, involving rival political and regional elites.

Yet he stressed that there was no real threat to the regime – the authorities had survived much worse challenges over the years, and former paramilitary leaders no longer carry the clout they once had.

Economist Hojimahmad Umarov argued that the location of the target in a former hotbed of political activity was significant.

“Most likely this was an act of intimidation against the people of Kulob, who have always been noted for being active, specifically for forming the core of the resistance against the armed opposition in the war,” he said.

Why worry about unrest in an area traditionally seen as so staunchly pro-government? Perhaps because, although it has produced many of the country’s political leaders over the last decade and a half, Kulob and the surrounding region have not benefited greatly as a whole, and remain chronically poor and underdeveloped.

“The living standards in the region are among the lowest in the country, and the divide between rich and poor is growing very fast,” said Umarov. “All this is aggravated by winter energy crises and unemployment.”

Tajikistan has been hit by multiple economic problems this year – an exceptionally harsh winter led to severe electricity shortages, and the price of fuel and food imports has jumped because of world market conditions.

As Abdullo pointed out – with reference to the whole of the country rather than Kulob specifically – the government cannot afford to have out-of-control factions around at a time when price rises and other economic factors make the public mood more uncertain than usual.

At the same time, analysts and ordinary Tajiks argue that confrontations like the one in Kulob are an echo of the past, not a warning of things to come.

Abdullo pointed out that in the latest clash, like the one that took place in Garm in February, “the population did not back those who were in conflict with the state”.

These days, “people are more concerned about economic problems than political ones”, he added.

Sherali, a resident of Kulob, agreed that there was little public appetite for conflict.

“How much more fighting do they want? Enough of that – let’s work on the economy and raise living standards,” he said. “How are things now? In the winter, we survive with candles and wood stoves, like in the Middle Ages.”

Komil, also from Kulob and now living in the capital, says people from his region may be “hotheads”, but they would not support armed groups these days.

“Everybody remembers the grief they felt when their relatives died,” he said. “God preserve us from war.”

Lola Olimova is IWPR’s editor in Tajikistan.

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