

Golden Valley Darkens

Author: IWPR

Islamic fundamentalists are exploiting economic hardship in the once prosperous Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan.

Muslim radicals looking to swell their ranks are frequent visitors to the bazaars of the Fergana Valley. Among the scrums of stallholders and shoppers, they seek out groups of idle young men with no work and no future.

Over the last decade thousands of unemployed Uzbek men have been recruited into well-paid jobs in Fergana's burgeoning Islamic movements.

"They recruit from amongst the unemployed, finding them at the bazaars and places where people tout for work," said 20-year-old Akhmadullo Umurzakov. "They never approach people who already have jobs."

The province, home to nearly a third of Uzbekistan's population, is increasingly under the influence of Muslim fundamentalists, some of whom are threatening to turn the country into an Islamic state.

Religious radicalism emerged in the early nineties following the collapse of the regional economy, once one of the most productive in central Asia.

Known as the "Pearl of Uzbekistan" or the "Golden Valley", the Fergana region, surrounded by towering mountain ranges, boasts some of the most fertile land in the country. In the Soviet era, it supplied fruit and vegetables to much of the republic and to many of its neighbours.

Following independence and the widespread failure of market reforms, the area went into decline. Factories closed and unemployment spiralled.

At the same time, restrictions on religious practice were relaxed. Radical Islamists from abroad joined local mullahs in promoting the Muslim faith, which, unlike other parts of Uzbekistan, had never been banned in the Fergana Valley.

"The Fergana Valley was left on the sidelines, away from the ideological control of the USSR," said Ismail Dadajanov, chairman of the Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces in the region.

"Islam surrounded us since childhood," said Akhmadullo. "I'm used to reciting prayers and observing fasts. It would be unthinkable not to."

Radical Muslim leaders exploited the growing numbers of disenfranchised unemployed men. Thousands were recruited into Islamic movements. "When the state failed, the Imams came to the fore," said historian Goga Khidyatov.

Some of the most extreme religious groups are based in the town of Namangan. According to Dadajanov, it was here in the late eighties that Takhir Yuldash, created his "Adolat", Justice, group, whose aim was the

creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.

Yuldash was forced to leave the country following Islam Karimov's 1991 election victory. While in exile he is said to have moved closer to the more militant Afghan Islamic groups and begun an armed struggle against the Uzbekistan government.

The Tashkent authorities accused Yuldash and his close associate Juma Namangani of responsibility for last year's bomb explosions in the capital, which left sixteen people dead and injured over 120.

During the nineties, extreme Islamic sects proliferated. Two of the largest movements, Wahabbism and Khizbut-Takhrir, are now reported to have up to ten thousand followers. Residents of entire housing estates in the valley are said to have joined them.

After the Tashkent bombing, the authorities hunted down Wahabbis and Khizbut-Takhriris. Many were arrested and put on trial. The cases revealed that defendants had come from impoverished backgrounds and had been heavily brainwashed. Those found guilty of being members of the movements or distributing their propaganda material were sentenced to prison terms of up to 20 years.

In some cases, the courts offered to free the defendants if they rejected the ideologies of their sects. None of them were prepared to do so. The Republic's public prosecution service said this was because they feared Islamic retribution.

Dadjanov is critical of the authorities approach, believing the crackdown on the Islamists only serves to make them more popular, " In my opinion, it would be better if the state didn't pay them so much attention. They're fanatics, young idiots, and these sentences, these reprisals are turning them into national heroes, martyrs."

He believes people should be allowed to read Islamist propaganda, as it would soon put them off, "Any sensible person would be able to appreciate the bankruptcy and illiteracy of what the Khizbut-Takhriris are writing."

The Fergana Valley is tired of unemployment, plunging living standards and insane religious fanatics. "People need to be given a chance to earn a decent living, wages should be raised and prices stabilised, " says Dadajanov. " We can only defeat the Islamists by giving people hope."

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