

Kazaks Braced for Islamic Insurgency

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The Kazak authorities are beefing up their forces in the south to counter Islamic rebels

The authorities in Astana are stepping up security in southern Kazakhstan following a resurgence of Islamic rebel activity.

The government began mobilising local men in March. It's been threatening to turn the region into a military zone since last summer.

Conscription was prompted by continued militant activity in the region. Last year, gunmen from Kyrgyzstan reportedly reached Bostandyk, in the Tashkent district. They also clashed with security forces less than 100 km from the southern city of Shymkent.

The identity of the insurgents remains a mystery. A special government team was sent to Bostandyk to investigate reports of militants in the area, but witnesses were few and far between

Shepherds and villagers in remote areas only spoke of "bearded men" - toting large amounts of cash - visiting their villages to buy food.

The political affiliation of the militants is unclear. People generally refer to them as "Wahabis" or "Talibs".

Wahabis, a strict Sunni Muslim sect originating in Saudi Arabia, have acquired a great deal of support across Central Asia. Talibs are linked to the puritanical Sunni Islam practiced by Afghanistan's rulers.

A third possibility is that the rebels are members of the Pan-Islamic organisation Khizb-ut-Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party), a well-established radical group that wants to install a Caliphate across all five Central Asian states.

While nobody really knows who the fighters are, what's certain is that conditions conducive for growth of religious extremism are present in the region.

The first is simple confusion: Kazakhstan is a secular state whose official faith is Islam. But Soviet rule stamped out religion so successfully, most Kazaks were Muslim in name only.

As such, they find it puzzling that the authorities should condemn Islamic radicals yet at the same time encourage the construction of mosques, Islamic institutes and schools.

Last year, several Jordanians and Syrians were prosecuted for running a summer training camp with a fairly martial curriculum.

The trial's verdict hardly cleared up public confusion for, although the camp's organisers were found guilty, they were immediately set free.

Mualen Asimbaev, director of the Kazak Institute of Strategic Studies, recently claimed that ignorance of Islam could lead to those who claim to be Muslims becoming extremists.

He called for the introduction of religious instruction in all schools and for there to be no interference in the work of state-sanctioned Islamic teachers.

A second factor fostering extremism is the dire economy. Life is difficult, but Muslim preachers brainwash people into believing that this is because the wrong form of Islam is being practiced.

Such arguments go down well with the unemployed, disaffected youth who hang around Kazakstan's bazaars.

South Kazakstan's Wahabis tend to be educated, non-violent people, but their critical attitude towards secular Central Asian states is obvious from their sermons and literature.

Less is known about the adherents of Khizb-ut-Takhrir. As yet, the Kazak branches of the group haven't caused as much trouble as in Tajikistan, where dozens of members have been jailed on charges of subversion and racial bigotry.

But the group has been stepping up recruitment activities recently, and its affiliation with the highly militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is causing concern in Kazakstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Last October, four people in Kazakstan's Turkestan region were detained for leafletting and possessing weapons. They were accused of being members of Khizb-ut-Takhrir and terrorist activities, though their trial later collapsed through lack of evidence.

The rising tension is resurrecting old prejudices, particularly against ethnic communities and foreigners.

Uigurs, a large Turkic minority, have been singled out, primarily because separatists among them have been involved in several incidents - in one four were killed in a shoot-out in Almaty last September.

Increasingly, the general public refer to all Uigurs as "terrorists", a generalisation only previously employed by the Kazak secret police.

In south Kazakstan, meanwhile, there are growing fears that the unidentified "bearded men" may strike again this spring. Intense military preparations in the region bear this out.

But it remains to be seen which poses the greatest threat to the country: the militants or the country's creeping culture of suspicion and confusion.

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