

## **Tajik Blasts Jangle Nerves**

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Reluctance to identify Dushanbe bombers reflects fears over escalation in political tensions.

When bombs explode in Tajikistan's capital, memories of the civil war resurface and people are wary of apportioning blame for fear re-igniting tensions.

So when the emergency situations ministry and the Amont Bank were targeted by bomb explosions on June 13, there was a new round of cautious speculation about who was responsible. The two buildings, which are adjacent to each other in central Dushanbe, had already been the target of similar attacks only five months ago.

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state to have experienced a civil war. Between 1992 and 1997, the conflict claimed over 100,000 victims and left the country almost destroyed – politically, economically and socially. A 1997 peace agreement has brought a gradual return to normality, and the government and the international community have made efforts to rebuild the country. However, memories of the war remain fresh.

The search for information about the recent bombings is proving a frustrating task. So far, different sources, both official and unofficial, have shed little light on who may have perpetrated the explosions and what their motives might have been. The civil war began in the spring of 1992 with gunfire and explosions in Dushanbe. Today, concern is growing among the Tajik people that these latest bombings could raise political tensions.

The government initially portrayed the January 31 incident as a settling of scores between criminal groups, much later describing it as an act of terrorism. And officials have said they “could not rule out” the possibility that the June 13 incident was a terrorist act. But few other details have emerged.

These uncertainties do little to reassure the public or prevent the spread of rumours. Meanwhile, the government wants to avoid any suggestions that the bombings could be linked to lingering dissatisfaction with domestic issues that remain unresolved.

As part of the 1997 peace agreement, the United Tajik Opposition was guaranteed substantial representation at all levels of government in order to help the process of reconciliation. However, this policy has not been seriously implemented, which has caused considerable tension across the political spectrum.

Despite assurances from the opposition that it would not resort to violence to achieve its political goals, there are fears that it might do so if continually ignored.

But opposition leaders reject any suggestion that their parties or followers are associated with the two bombings.

The deputy head of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan Rakhmatullo Valiev dismissed the theory that the latest blast could be connected to the arrest of party leader Makhmadruzi Iskandarov, “We fight by strictly political means, and this explosion can in no way be related to Iskandarov.”

One of the leaders of the Islamic Revival Party Khikmatullo Saifullozoda denied that radical Tajik Muslims looking to capitalise on the unrest in Uzbekistan might have been behind the latest blast, “I rule out the possibility that the explosion in Dushanbe was connected with the events in Andijan, or that it was an attempt to destabilise the situation in Tajikistan.”

Given that Uzbekistan intervened in the Tajik civil war by siding with particular factions, some Tajiks are keen to blame foreign forces for the recent attacks.

There was speculation that the June 13 explosion may have been an attempt by foreigners to disrupt Afghan president Hamid Karzai's visit to Tajikistan to lay the foundation stone for a new bridge spanning the Tajik-Afghan border. The project is largely financed by the US and the ceremony has already been delayed several times at the request of the Afghan side because of concerns over the Karzai's security.

But as local analyst Tursun Kabirov observed, “It is incomprehensible why Karzai needs to be intimidated in this way if work on the bridge can begin whether he visits or not.”

Others have speculated that the recent violence might be linked to drug-trafficking, as gangs engaged in the trade are well known to run certain areas of the economy, despite efforts by the government to

counter them.

Following the January bombing, deputy director of the Tajikistan Strategic Research Centre Saifullo Safarov suggested that the explosion could have been a settling of scores between gang members.

Kabirov now believes that this is the best explanation for the two attacks, "Taking all the circumstances of both explosions into account, it is clear that the terrorist acts are part of a conflict in the sphere of business interests rather than politically-motivated. "

Kabirov cites as an example the killing of the first deputy minister of internal affairs, Khabib Sanginov, in 2001. An investigation into his murder later revealed that he died as a result of a dispute between rival gangs, one of which he is said to have headed.

**Location:** Uzbekistan  
Tajikistan

**Focus:** Central Asia

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