

## **Tajik Government Says Rebel General Dead**

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Possible motives for rebellion unclear as authorities spin "Islamic party connection".

Nearly two weeks after a military rebellion in Tajikistan, the government says the ringleader, General Abduhalim Nazarzoda, is dead.

In a statement, the prosecution service said Nazarzoda and a number of supporters died on September 16 in the Romit Gorge, a mountain area east of the capital Dushanbe where they had holed up.

The statement also firmed up the allegation that Nazarzoda – who was deputy defence minister until the September 4 violence – was acting in collusion with the Islamic Rebirth Party (IRP). This claim makes it easier for the government to justify its ongoing efforts to dissolve the IRP, which has been a strong but moderate political force in Tajikistan for nearly two decades.

Prosecutors said 25 members of Nazarzoda's group had been killed and 125 had been captured, and 14 members of the security services had also died in operations to suppress the rebellion since it began on September 4, when police on a road near the airport and also in the nearby town of Vahdat came under attack. The interior ministry said eight policemen died and nine of the attackers were killed in these two raids. The rebels also entered a defence ministry building, apparently unopposed, and raided its arms store. The next day, a traffic police checkpoint on the outskirts of Dushanbe was attacked. One policeman died and several were injured.

After the raids, Nazarzoda retreated with his men and plundered weapons into the Romit valley, where they were pursued and surrounded by government security forces.

The events that led up to this outbreak of violence, as well as the general's personal motives, remain obscure. But they are a reminder that the general calm in Tajikistan is periodically punctuated by rebellions, often involving figures from the civil war of the early 1990s and reawakening memories of chaos and bloodshed.

In its early statements on Nazarzoda's role in these events, the interior ministry was already alluding to his alleged membership of the IRP.

A statement purporting to be from the general said he and other officers acted after hearing that the government planned to purge senior military commanders who belonged to the IRP. Rather than face "shameful arrest and possible death under torture", they and men loyal to them seized weapons and broke out of the city.

The IRP later denied that Nazarzoda was a member, saying this was just the latest in a series of attempts to damage its reputation.

The IRP is Tajikistan's major opposition party and Central Asia's only legal Islamic political group. This is a legacy of the 1992-97 civil war, in which the IRP was the leading force in a guerrilla group that battled the Rahmon administration. In a peace deal brokered by Russia and Iran, the IRP agreed to disarm its men in exchange for political legitimacy and a share of government positions.

In the years since then, the IRP has seen most of its members edged out of their posts, but it has continued to contest elections. In March, however, it lost the two parliamentary seats it held in a ballot of questionable fairness. Both before and after the election, it was subjected to a concerted smear campaign and members were pressured to leave.

At the end of August, the Tajik justice ministry gave the IRP ten days to close down, days after its national and local headquarters had been shut. On September 16 and 17, 13 of the party's top leaders were arrested. (See [Tajikistan's Embattled Islamic Party](#).)

Although the IRP has been a force for moderation in both its politics and religious views, the government is now trying to link it to Islamic State, which is increasingly recruiting in Tajikistan.

Defence expert Parviz Rasulov is familiar with Nazarzoda's past and says he was indeed one of those appointed under the 30 per cent quota deal that helped end the civil war in 1997. But according to Rasulov, Nazarzoda was not involved in the insurgency – he was not even in Tajikistan during those years. Instead, he was asked by the IRP leadership to take command of a rebel unit as the peace deal was being signed, in June 1997 in order to help integrate it into the government army.

“I know for a fact that he is not a member of the IRP,” Rasulov said.

By September 17, the official story had been hardened up so that the claim was that Nazarzoda and IRP leaders actively colluded in a meticulously planned and funded plot to mount a coup d’etat. IRP leader Muhiddin Kabiri told the RFE/RL station that the whole story was untrue, and that the authorities were using the Nazarzoda rebellion as a pretext to discredit and destroy his party.

**Location:** Tajikistan

**Topic:** Conflict  
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