

Tajikistan: Fall of Praetorian Guardsman

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Capital remains tense after arrest of powerful figure who fell out of favour with the authorities.

The arrest last week of Tajikistan's drugs chief looks like a determined attempt to remove a powerful political player from the scene for good.

General Ghafur Mirzoev was detained on August 6 and then sacked as head of the country's Drugs Control Agency. Chief prosecutor Bobojon Bobokhonov said the general was suspected of illegal possession of weapons, unlawful business activities, and the murder of a local police chief.

The list of possible charges against Mirzoev may look plausible enough, but some analysts believe he has been targeted for political reasons, because he is a major figure who has fallen foul of President Imomali Rahmonov.

In this rumour-ridden society, there is also a counter-theory - that the general was planning a coup against Rahmonov.

General Mirzoev was once a trusted ally of the president, helping install him in 1992 as civil war flared up, and later heading the elite Presidential Guard. But he was sacked as commander of the force in January 2004 after apparently falling out of favour.

His appointment as head of the narcotics agency was by way of a consolation prize, although the post is an important one since Tajikistan is a major drug transit route for Afghan heroin.

The accusations themselves are a mixed bag: the arms issue is current, and relates to a police search accompanying Mirzoev's arrest which is said to have unearthed some 3,000 weapons on the premises of the anti-narcotics agency. But the murder accusation dates back to a killing which took place in 1998, at a time when Mirzoev was part of the president's inner circle.

What is certain is that arrest of a once-powerful commander and the rumours of a coup plot have unnerved many people in a country devastated by five years of civil war ending in 1997, and where even government officials used to retain rival paramilitary forces.

The mood in Tajikistan remained tense this week, with a heavy police presence on the streets of Dushanbe and extra checkpoints at key points on the roads. Interior and security ministry troops have been placed on high alert.

Mirzoev, known by the nickname Ghafur Sedoy (Ghafur the Grey), was a powerful ally of the president, crushing paramilitary rebellions on his behalf and providing his personal security in a still unstable environment.

A political analyst in Tajikistan who declined to be named said the two men grew estranged because of a growing split within the country's ruling elite, which is drawn mainly from the area around the town of Kulyab in the south of the country.

Instead of maintaining the position of the Kulyab faction, or seeking to bring new people from other parts of Tajikistan into his administration, Rahmonov has reportedly narrowed his recruitment base to the area around Dangara, his home town. This has angered officials from other parts of Kulyab, who feel it was they who brought the president to power, and kept him there through troubled times.

Mirzoev is viewed as close to one such elite figure, Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev, whose posts as mayor of Dushanbe and chair of the upper house of parliament do only partial justice to the extent of his political influence. Ubaidulloev is too powerful to be dislodged, but removing an ally with the capacity to drum up military support may have been a move to weaken his position.

Mirzoev's political obliteration was a two-stage affair. Switching him from the Presidential Guard to the narcotics agency deprived him of direct control over a legitimate military unit, making him all the more vulnerable.

However, Rahmonov seems to have been waiting until he felt secure enough to take Mirzoev out of circulation altogether.

"He had long been on the list of commanders whom the president wanted to get rid of," said independent political scientist Tursun Kabirov. "However, the president did not have enough support."

That support seems to have come from Moscow. Analysts in Dushanbe told IWPR that Rahmonov felt able to make his move after talks with Russian president Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort of Sochi in June. At that meeting, observers said that Putin gave Rahmonov assurances that Russia would provide military support if ever his leadership was under threat.

Moscow has been courting Dushanbe in an attempt to secure a long-term agreement on a Russian military presence in Tajikistan. Its decision earlier this year to extradite former Tajik interior minister Yaqub Salimov was seen by some analysts as part of this complex deal.

Mirzoev's reported links with Salimov cannot have improved his political chances once the disgraced minister was safely locked away in a Tajik jail.

It has been suggested that Mirzoev was considering a coup against Rahmonov, but the facts are murky. Similar rumours circulated when he was sacked in January - he himself denied them.

A senior official in the interior ministry, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR that the coup plot was "one possible reason" for the general's arrest.

"Mirzoev had enormous supplies of modern weaponry, and he could have accomplished a coup if the situation had worsened drastically," said the official. "According to our information, he held talks on this with former commanders of the [pro-government] Popular Front who had fallen out of favour with the president."

The rumours may have been fuelled by hot-headed talk among Mirzoev's supporters. One of them, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR that the general possessed plenty more weapons, and "could easily organise a rebellion - even from jail. I don't doubt that the president will receive a response".

Nothing has been heard from Mirzoev since his arrest, and it is far from clear that such remarks reflect his views.

Despite the unease the talk of a coup has caused in Dushanbe, the head of Tajikistan's security council, Amirkul Azimov, insisted that tensions would soon ease.

"I believe the situation will calm down," he told IWPR. "The people won't follow Mirzoev's supporters. He overstepped the law and he has to take responsibility for this."

Said Nuriev, an electrician in Dushanbe, spoke for many ordinary Tajiks when he said, "Every time a high-profile person is removed from office, we always fear it will backfire and that disturbances will follow."

Location: Central Asia
Uzbekistan
Turkmenistan
Tajikistan
Focus: Central Asia

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