

## The ongoing destabilisation of Tajikistan

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In recent weeks the situation in Tajikistan has worsened. Clashes regularly occur between the law enforcement representatives and Islamic radicals or organised criminal groups, as do bomb attacks. Also, the recent escape of 25 prisoners charged with terrorism and anti-state activities was equally spectacular. These incidents are part of increasingly frequent social disturbances, as well as reshuffles in the ruling elites. There is no guarantee that the government's activities will allow it to reverse the dangerous trend of destabilisation in the country; yet if this trend continues, it will strengthen the 'zone of instability' in the region which currently includes Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

### Disturbances in Tajikistan

Although the situation in Tajikistan, especially over the last two years, could not be described as especially peaceful (information is continually coming to light regarding the activities of Islamic radicals, and of anti-terrorist operations), recent weeks have seen a deterioration of the situation. On 23 August, 25 prisoners escaped from a maximum security prison in Dushanbe; they had been given long sentences, and included members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and al-Qaida (they numbered one former inmate of Guantanamo and 11 foreigners among them), as well as political opponents of President Emomali Rahmon. In the two weeks they were hunted, only six of them were caught.

On 3 September, according to the available information, a suicide bombing was carried out on the headquarters of the Committee to Combat Organised Crime in Khojent in which at least two people died and around 30 were wounded. Two days later, a bomb exploded in a disco in Dushanbe (several people were injured). Next, on 10 September a serious clash took place on the Tajik/Afghan border, during which at least 20 Taliban fighters died; and on 13 September an attack lasting several hours was carried out on a police station in the suburbs of Dushanbe. The government has ascribed both the armed clashes and the bombings to Muslim terrorists, although it cannot be ruled out that organised crime, possibly linked to the drugs trade, was involved. President Rahmon has ordered all students of religious schools, who are estimated to number between four and six thousand, to return from abroad (mainly Pakistan, Iran and the Arab states); permits to leave for such journeys were also withdrawn, and suspects were arrested at airports.

In parallel with this, tension is visibly rising among the Tajik ruling elite. After the embarrassing escape from Dushanbe prison, the head of the National Security Committee (the former KGB), who was one of the last representatives of Rahmon's old guard at the head of the security structure, was sacked; the escape itself is being treated in Tajikistan as

part of the political manoeuvrings between the president and the elite. The attitude of the very powerful regional and clan elites (whom the president has consistently blocked) remains an open question. The fear exists that in these conditions of political tension, potential opponents to the government will mobilise; this has found expression in the hectic attempts which the government has made to calm them down. For example, in the provincial town of Rasht on 15 September, the heads of the defence and foreign ministries and the Committee for National Security were supposed to attend negotiations with former commanders from the civil war period.

Signs that public opinion is becoming radicalised have also been noted; there is a readiness to organise local protests and confrontations with the law enforcement representatives (most recently in the town of Nurek), or to start riots (twice in recent weeks in Khorog), such as has not been seen in Tajikistan since the end of the civil war.

### **Tajikistan – a failing state?**

Internal stability is a chronic challenge for Tajikistan, as it is for the region as a whole. In the last twenty years, the country has experienced a bloody civil war (1992-7); thereafter it became a shelter and a transit route for both Muslim radicals (including the IMU) and organised drug smugglers. The natural conditions (the mountains, the poorly developed infrastructure, the border with Afghanistan), the social and economic circumstances (economic backwardness, demographic pressures, the deep current crisis) and the specific socio-political environment all pose a systematic challenge to stability. In Tajikistan, clan and regional divisions play a great role; in recent years President Rahmon and a narrow circle of his own clan from the Kulab region have consistently built up their dominance, based on a fierce struggle with their political opponents. This has been accompanied by socio-political pathologies (the weakness of state structures and institutions, corruption, criminality). In this situation, control over the territory and the state borders (including that with Afghanistan), especially in the face of these internal tensions, is illusory. That means that the functionality of the Tajik state is limited, and to an even greater degree than before, the country will extend the 'zone of instability' from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Kyrgyzstan (the latter especially in the chaotic conditions prevailing since the coup earlier this year).

Tajikistan's problems also pose an enormous challenge for the region; they are a direct threat to its neighbours, and moreover, they are an element of calculation for external powers, especially Russia and the USA. For Washington, Tajikistan is a logistical backup to the Operation "Enduring Freedom"/ISAF missions in Afghanistan; over time, its importance as an element of support for American policy should grow. Russia treats Tajikistan as a client (and in recent years, not a very loyal one), and as the main focus of its military presence in the region (the 201st base). At the same time, Russia has often exploited the tension in Tajikistan (especially during the civil war) to increase its own control over that country, and also exploited the problems generated by Tajikistan to increase control over the region as a whole. It cannot be ruled out that these powers' interest in Tajikistan will become a destabilising factor.

Even if Tajikistan's recent problems do not lead to spectacular shocks (like what happened in Kyrgyzstan), it does not seem likely that the situation could improve significantly; the Tajik state is threatened with a deep internal crisis.

## Tajikistan and its neighbours

