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Who is Tolib Ayombekov?

Recent events in Badakhshan has put one person’s name on the lips of the media, knowledge of whom up until a week ago was limited to the borders of this province.



by Farhod Milod
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Now, organs of the Government of Tajikistan describe him as a smuggler and criminal, but for his followers he is a champion worthy of sacrificing one’s life for.

Tolib Ayombekov, aka «Commander-Tolib», General of border guard directorate of Tajikistan’s SCNS [State Committee for National Security, GKNB, aka ‘KGB’], up until the eve of 21 July [2012] was working under General Major Abdullo Nazarov, head of the SCNS directorate in Badakhshan. But after than evening, he was declared a suspect in the murder of his own boss and only for his insubordination was it that government forces entered Khorog.

Some describe these events as a way for the Government of Tajikistan to bring Badakhshan under its control, some call it an internal clamp-down on the smuggling market of various goods and some also refer to it as the beginnings of the next round of insecurity arising due to pressures on the Government of Tajikistan from regional discussions on military and water. Tolib Ayombekov is referred to as a key individual and excuse for implementing [“омили ичроғари”] this big plan.

Khushnud Rahmatulloev, spokesperson for the SCNS border guard directorate of Tajikistan, says that formal information about Ayombekov is secret, but he was not an important figure from among such authorities: «*He was merely the deputy to the head of the directorate in the Ishkoshim detachment. There they first have the head of the detachment and then the head of the directorate and then deputy to the head of directorate, i.e. he was a second in command person.*»

Security officials have charged Tolib Ayombekov and members of his group in the murder of General Abdullo Nazarov, and in the statement which lists the reasons for entry of government forces into Khorog have said that the said person and his associates not only have not surrendered to the authorities, but also have disregarded the requests of the authorities engaged in investigating the murder. In this statement, Tolib Ayombekov and his illegal armed group are charged with the smuggling of drugs, tobacco, precious stones and also with [other] serious crimes including banditry. Furthermore, the government considers Tolib Ayombekov as the reason for the commencement of the Khorog operations which so far has resulted in tens of deaths and injured.

The 46-year-old Tolib Ayombekov, the key personality in the Khorog events, is the brother of Abdulamon Ayombekov, aka “Alyosh-Gorbun” or “Hunchback Alyosh”, who was killed in 1994.



According to **Davlat Usmon**, the [former] commander-in-charge of all of UTO (United Tajik Opposition) in Qaroteguine and Badakhshan, Tolib was a member of his brother's group and after his [brother's] death, he took up the leadership of the same: *«It was 1994. He came to fore after a series of mysterious deaths of Badakhshan commanders. Those days, unidentified persons blew up the vehicle of his brother, Abdulamon. Two other famous commanders, Majnun Pallaev and Hoji Abdurashid were eliminated, they were poisoned. That is, he took up a reputation [or position] due to his brother's reputation».*

After the end of the civil war, from the 30 percent quota of the opposition in the Government of Tajikistan [per the 1997 Peace Accord] Tolib Ayombekov became the battalion commander of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Khorog, but after a while he was taken off this responsibility. He was unemployed for a while, but after the 2008 demonstrations in Khorog, which they consider Tolib as among its organizers, he found a new government position in the border guard directorate. In July of that year, when the government sought the disarmament of Tolib Ayombekov, Mamadboqir Mamadboqirov, Imonnazar Imonnazarov and Yodgorsho Mamadaslam's groups, hundreds of people from among the women [of Khorog] took to the centre of town and demonstrated against the [government's] pressure and the possibility of bloodshed.

The officials claim that Ayombekov took over the said position «by force», as they say, so that he could have access to legal and illegal trade and up until 21 July [2012] he was involved in the trade of drugs, tobacco and precious medals.



But **Alim Sherzamonov**, head of the SDPT [Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan] in Badakhshan and a friend and supporter of Tolib Ayombekov, who is now in Moscow, says that [Ayombekov] was not involved in drug trafficking without the knowledge of high officials and powerful hands from Dushanbe: *«I know well that he was engaged in the trade of precious stones. But in any trade that he participated in, the associate and owners of this trade were among the higher-ups in Dushanbe. Or tobacco is transported by the “Planeta” company trucks, which I do not know who owns it, but surely it is not that of the Badakhshan commanders».*

Alim Sherzamonov says that he grew up with Tolib Ayombekov in two adjacent streets of Khorog. He says that during childhood there were fights among [the kids] of their streets, but Tolib would stop them. He evaluated Tolib as an educated person who differed from other commanders, thus the government saw him as their main enemy. He added that Tolib would not allow people from Dushanbe to be sent for government posts to Badakhshan, so that they could harm the people of the province or to extort bribes.

But another one of our interlocutors who was born in Khorog who introduces himself as **Nekqadam**, says that Tolib Ayombekov and other commanders were the «second but main government» in Badakhshan. He added that if someone had a disagreement with government officials or another, he would go not to the police [милиса], but directly to Tolib Ayombekov and the latter would solve his problem. Nekqadam said that even government representatives who come to Badakhshan from Dushanbe, they first «pay their respects» to the commanders, and only then do they meet with the provincial government.

He added that the decisions which were taken in the government, were to not hurt the interests of the commanders, indeed the real [de facto] head of the police was Ayombekov himself: *«Tolib Ayombekov is the same as Mirzo Jaga [Mirzo Ziyoyev] and commander Jomi and other commanders, he is of the same crop [полуз]. He does not have much of an education, they say he completed the teachers’ college. They gave him the Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel titles from the 30 percent quota and he became a government person, but he was against the government. This man has no intelligence. He has persecuted many people and taken their goods/violated their rights [ҳаққи бисёрӯҳоро хӯрдааст]. He has built his life based on illegal activities, he has homes in a number of places in Khorog. In reality [only] his relatives back him, the people are fed up with his face. They know that he is involved in drug trafficking, his hands are not clean».*

A government interlocutor of ours says that Ayombekov was so little respect for the

head of the Anti-Drug Agency under the President of Tajikistan that the sale of opium in schools and streets was done openly.

Our interlocutor tells of the murder of Major-General Abdullo Nazarov as the height of Tolib Ayombekov's crimes. But in his last interview with Radio Liberty [Radio Free Europe], Tolib Ayombekov described his relationship with his boss as very friendly:

«We met periodically. He [General Nazarov] participated in the wedding of my son and my nephew. We both [were good Muslims who] said our prayers. We would sit together and discuss things like older and younger brothers. I do not understand it, this is politics, a conspiracy or what? But as to how my relationship was with the General, his wife knows this very well.»

My other interlocutor as well refers to the very good relations between the two key individuals in the Khorog events. But our government interlocutor says that Tolib Ayombekov is directly linked to the murder of General Nazarov, because the two individuals whom he has not surrendered to the officials are his brother and his son.

Furthermore, some have also linked the transformation in the relationship between these two high officials to the overall changes in the politics of the region. Experts claim that Russia took over Badakhshan in the 19th century so as to own Central Asia later on, and today as well it wants to [таҳти назорат] control Badakhshan, so that in the future it would not lose the region. They say the reason behind the longevity of Tolib Ayombekov and [other] Badakhshan commanders was also that with knowledge or ignorance they [Russia] had and have this mission.

According to our information, Tolib Ayombekov had one day fled to Afghanistan and once again returned. As to what fate will bring him depends on what happens with the events in Khorog which are still going on ...