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Taliban's Drug Ban, Heavy-Handed Tactics Fuel Deadly Protests In Northern Afghanistan

By [Abubakar Siddique](#) and [RFE/RL's Radio Azadi](#)

Afghanistan's northern province of Badakhshan has been the scene of violent protests against the Taliban in recent weeks.

The rare demonstrations have been fueled by the militant group's forceful enforcement of its ban on illicit drugs, a lifeline for tens of thousands of impoverished farmers.

The Taliban has violently clamped down on the rallies, shooting and killing several protesters and rounding up dozens of locals.

The anti-Taliban rallies, observers say, reveal the anger at the hard-line Islamist group's unpopular policies and its use of heavy-handed tactics to crush dissent.

"This is an alarm bell for the ruling Taliban," said Nazifa Haqpal, a British-based Afghan researcher. "The Taliban's despotic governance based on brute force is not working."

Nearly three years after the Taliban seized power, the group has shown little interest in "understanding [Afghans'] issues or adopting appropriate policies" to address them, said Haqpal.

'Anger And Protests'

Protests broke out on May 3-4 in Badakhshan's Darayim and Argo districts after Taliban forces tasked with clearing poppy crops clashed with farmers. Locals said the Taliban opened fire and killed two people.

The Taliban sent a delegation to negotiate with the farmers and later said calm had been restored.

But on May 13, protests again erupted in the Argo district. The Taliban responded with brute force, killing two people and wounding more than a dozen others, locals said.

“People did not want their crops to be destroyed,” Shamsuddin Mubarez, a resident of the Argo district, told RFE/RL’s Radio Azadi.

When locals [protested](#), Mubarez said, the Taliban responded by using force. That created “more troubles,” he said.

Kalimullah Humsukhan, a resident of the Darayim district, told Radio Azadi that the Taliban’s forced eradication of poppy fields triggered “anger and protests” in the district earlier in May. He said locals resented the militants’ violent tactics.

'Little Or Nothing'

Since regaining power in 2021, the Taliban has imposed severe restrictions on women, waged a brutal crackdown on dissent, and monopolized power.

The group’s extremist policies have angered Afghans and made its unrecognized government an international pariah.

The Taliban’s 2022 drug ban has significantly reduced the production of opium. But the group has failed to provide farmers with alternative livelihoods and crops, pushing many deeper into poverty amid a devastating economic and humanitarian crisis.

Graeme Smith, a senior Afghanistan analyst at the International Crisis Group, said the Taliban’s ban on narcotics has hit farmers in mountainous areas such as Badakhshan particularly hard, because they have smaller and less productive farms.

“Farmers do not have large stockpiles and little or nothing in reserve to sell,” he said.

Smith said “the only answer [for farmers] now will be nonfarm employment” because alternative crops cannot replace opium, whose price has skyrocketed in recent years.

'Afghan Spring'

The deadly protests in Badakhshan are not isolated.

On May 9, the Taliban killed at least four people after a rally in the eastern province of [Nangarhar](#), which borders Pakistan.

The militants ordered locals to vacate their homes to make way for the construction of a customs clearing facility. Locals resisted the demolition and blocked a major highway. The Taliban responded by firing on the crowd.

Smith said it was not a coincidence that there has been unrest in Nangarhar and Badakhshan, which contributed significantly to the ranks of the armed forces of the former Western-backed Afghan government.

“Now the survivors from those defeated forces are suffering high levels of unemployment,” he said.

Badakhshan is also a predominately ethnic Tajik region and was once a bastion of resistance to the Taliban in the 1990s. The Taliban is mostly made up of Pashtuns.

Haqpal said the protests are evidence of the “political and legal consciousness” that was formed in Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 toppled the Taliban’s first regime.

The Taliban could face an “Afghan Spring” if such “protests get organized and spread,” she said.

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