

Police and Thieves in Ishkashim: Local residents react to flaws and abuses



When a robber who had been detained by villagers in a remote district of Badakhshan escaped police custody overnight on Saturday, local residents blamed police connivance. Exasperated, they took to the streets, demanding the arrest of the runaway and the removal of the district chief of police and governor. Surprisingly, they won the day. Yet, AAN's Fabrizio Foschini reports, deeper troubles - drug smuggling and political exclusion of locals - still remain.

The plot is simple and, arguably, lacks originality: despite crime being widespread and heinous, the police seem unable or unwilling to stop the perpetrators. In the end, the residents themselves manage to capture some of the criminals, but the corrupt/ineffective criminal justice system guarantees they are able to get away and return to their lives of crime with a vengeance. Locals decide to take justice into their own hands.

Such a plot, reminiscent of Italian vigilantes exploitation movies of the 1970s, has been played out in various parts of Afghanistan in recent years (about the escape of detainees read, for example, this [article](#)). Yet, what a surprise to see such a drama in a place like Ishkashim, in Badakhshan, arguably one of the safest spots in Afghanistan (if not the world). It should be stressed how absolutely unusual it is for this population, highly educated and law-abiding, and this not by imagined ' Afghan standards ' only, indulging in hurling stones at the police and besieging the municipality building, during a mass protest which saw the participation of several hundred (some local witness report up to one thousand) people.

The prequel: on Saturday night, local residents surprised a small group of robbers intent on preparing a raid in Torbat, a tiny hamlet a half hour walk from the main Ishkashim bazaar. Three managed to flee, but one was overpowered and detained by the villagers. They immediately brought him to the police station in Ishkashim, asking for him to be questioned. The chief of police told them: 'It's midnight, it's too late now, go home, come tomorrow morning and we'll talk.' He took the man into custody.

The custody was not too effective and when the complainants came back early the following morning, at around 7.30, the 'bird had flown'. Incensed at what had happened, the villagers from Torbat gathered in the bazaar starting a protest which was soon joined by hundreds of fellow residents, mainly local Ismaili inhabitants who come from the nearby hamlets dotting the hill slopes around Ishkashim, but also many of the shopkeepers who come from all over Afghanistan and reside permanently or part-time in the bazaar.

The crowd reached the wuluswali, the building that hosts the district governor office, which is also adjacent to the police station, and virtually besieged it, demanding loudly that the authorities do something to catch the robbers. They believe these to be part of a gang which has been terrorising the countryside of Ishkashim as of late. Heavily armed, they have carried out several night raids, targeting rural houses where only a few carpets and cash may be found. Suspicion lingered that the thieves received guidance from a local person, but they were otherwise reckoned as being people from 'outside' Ishkashim, from Baharak or, most probably, Warduj district, like the briefly detained suspect himself was.

The protesters went on to ask for the removal of both the district governor and the police chief - whose alleged negative past record as a very harsh and occasionally abusive officer, even apart from the obvious complicity or incompetence displayed in the latest case, was condemned by locals who spoke to AAN over the phone. Some of the protesters then started to appear on the scene armed with sticks and hurled stones at the building, shattering all its windows. The chief of the border police led a detachment of his men from their cantonment located at the other end of the long bazaar and tried to defuse the situation and end the siege.⁽¹⁾ He was, however, confronted by the protesters and repulsed. Soon the police started firing warning shots in the air to try and disperse the crowd by force, but it was in vain. The protest eventually started melting away after noon, but only after greater numbers of people had gathered, including community elders; they took oaths to carry on the protest until their demands were met. At the end of the first day, Sunday 14 July, around a dozen people were reported injured, among them at least one policeman.

This morning they again assembled, but a sudden development cut short the possibility of further troubles, at least for today. The runaway had magically reappeared at the police station. He was identified as a border policeman and is now in custody. The police had evidently tried to cover up for their colleague and had sent him to the border police station during the night of his arrest. He had passed the day in hiding there before the magnitude of the protest convinced his superiors of the need to give him up.

According to locals interviewed, the chief of police and the district governor are currently in hiding, judging it worthwhile to avoid showing their faces in town too much. Certainly they have

not been answering their phones. The deputy district governor confirmed to AAN that yesterday they had uttered hopeless words about the possibility of resuming their jobs in tranquillity. Locals have made it known that the two officials need not to trouble themselves by coming to work, as their dismissal stands second on the people ' s list of demands.

The reaction of the normally very peaceful residents may seem disproportionate. Despite the robberies of the recent months, the area enjoys a degree of stability and security that few places in Afghanistan can boast of. To understand the deeper frustrations that might have piled up inside the minds of the inhabitants of Ishkashim one must take a look back at their situation during the last two decades.

The local Ismaili inhabitants found themselves the losers twice when Najibullah fell, first as supporters of the Communist regime, and second as suspiciously heterodox Muslims in the eyes of the zealous Sunni mujahedin. After the fury of the first mujahedin conquest in 1991, they were not targeted directly for their religious views, but were subjected to the imposition of alien - and often abusive - authority over them, ie, they were excluded from political power which remained in the hands of Sunni Tajiks (usually referred to as 'Badakhshis' by the Ismailis) from the central Badakhshan districts.

This situation remains unchanged to this today. The current district governor, police chief and chief of the border police are all outsiders – from Baharak district, Panjshir province and Keshm district respectively. (2) But that alone would not have been enough to trigger a crisis. Another exacerbating factor are the itinerant Badakhshi ' carpetbaggers ' who starting from Ishkashim, at the breaking of spring still regularly move to all the frontier, Ismaili-inhabited districts (usually called Pamir, although geographically, Pamir proper would comprise only parts of Wakhan and the portion of Shughnan that went to Russia and Tajikistan). This is when travelling becomes possible and the winter-starved villagers who have depleted all their food-reserves are only too willing to sell the few jewels they have left, some of the cattle that made it through the freeze, or, if they do not have any assets, to take a loan, in exchange for much needed food items or ' medicines ' . The latter consists often of opium, and in recent times heroin, whose consumption is as widespread among poor Ismaili households as its production is among poor Sunni households in central Badakhshan.

This is the darker side of things, however. Incoming Badakhshi traders also provide much needed goods and some of the few means of transport that operate in the area during the good season. Even their role as moneylenders is vital, although often problematic, for the cash-stripped peasants of the Pamir. There may be among them petty criminals with whom co-existence is not idyllic for the local population - I remember troubles in finding the otherwise, always-ready shelter for the night in Ismaili houses when traveling in 2009 with one such character, a Warduji in fact, a most entertaining companion but a true scallywag. However, the problems of inequality in the balance of economics and power in the Pamir would not to be solved by "banishing" a few rascals.

The problems go deeper and their foundation rest in the impressive expansion of the bazaar of Ishkashim in the late 1990s, at the hands of the late Shura-e Nizar commander Najmuddin Waseq. Replacing the power of the guns with that of money and legal ownership, he built up the

Ishkashim bazaar as his power base by allocating shops and trade concessions to his many allies from Warduj and Baharak. This connected himself to Tajikistan and the outer world at a time when the Taleban controlled most of Afghanistan's border crossings. Goods and money started flowing, with some beneficial, and many damning, effects on the rural Ismaili population who had not been particularly favoured by the distribution of plots and had, anyway, little capital to invest in trade. At the same time, the Agha Khan Foundation's humanitarian agency, FOCUS, saw its access facilitated, with hugely positive effects for the population of this part of Afghanistan, both Ismailis and Sunnis.

Nowadays, with its 300-odd shops, Ishkashim is the main commercial hub for the whole Pamir area, having found anew its traditional place on the Silk Road - the imperfect but real one out of the many imaginary Silk Roads presented at international conferences. It is the place where many local Ismailis and Afghans from all sort of backgrounds, Sunni Badakhshis and people from Panjshir, Kunduz, Jalalabad and Laghman, all live and work in pursuit of their legal businesses. They trade with the Ismaili villages, which are not always self-sufficient food-wise and are cut off from other markets and therefore crave all sorts of imported goods. They also trade with Tajikistan (read this [article](#)). There is a weekly bazaar-e mushtarak (shared bazaar) on a small island midway between the Afghan and the Tajik banks of the Amu Darya where, each Saturday, they go to exchange old Indian/Pakistani clothes for Russian and Chinese wares (and, yes, to wink at the Tajik girls).

So Ishkashim is not half as remote and 'unimportant' as other places in rural Afghanistan are for provincial and national authorities. In fact, Ishkashim is one of Afghanistan's foremost drug trafficking hubs. Its long border with Tajikistan provides all sort of smugglers – kachakbaran – with opportunities to ply their business. The risky river-crossing for those without political connections is usually made by local residents who owe money or have become addicted to opiates. The more comfortable official border with its paved road, nay, the very bazaar-e mushtarak on the day of the fare, as well as on board the police vehicles of both countries' officers seems to be the preference for smugglers with political cover. Here lies the curse of Ishkashim's immutable situation when it comes to the distribution of power.

Powerbrokers from all over Badakhshan vie for the control of positions of authority in Ishkashim and the profitable smuggling opportunities that arise once they have planted their own men or allies there (read our previous blog [here](#)). In the words of a local interviewed by AAN:

[The authorities] come here and have no interest in or commitment to state institutions or the welfare of the population. They come here for their profit, to build their bandars ('crooks' bazaars') and make their business, so the local people are forced to do something themselves.

It is not necessarily that the police are all robbers – although one at least seems to have been in this case - but that many among them prefer to live and let live, fearing to clash against rocks that are harder than themselves. Moreover, the robbers generally appear to studiously avoid targeting anybody powerful enough to create a backlash, like the big traders with political connections, preferring rather to target ordinary Ismaili households in the rural hamlets, as in the recent heists.

This state of things is, of course, taking a toll on the opportunities for Ishkashim and other nearby districts to develop normally. This district actually has not just good security, but also access guaranteed year-round from the Tajik border. It also has some of the country ' s most sought after places of natural beauty, like the highest Afghan peak (Nowshak, 7492 m), and it is the natural entrance to the Wakhan Corridor, making it a prime potential destination for foreign tourism. The Pamir districts are also making giant steps forward in the fields of education and health.(3) The frustration of locals with the authorities does not proceed from either ethnic or sectarian separatist claims - although there is an imbalance of power clear to anybody in this respect, local Ismailis are strong supporters of the central state. Rather their objections come from the failure to have any say in their own governance at a time when things could be getting so much better in a place where things have always needed to get better as long as anyone can remember.

Locals remember too the paradoxes to which this situation brought them, many years ago. In 1997, in neighbouring Zebak, another Ismaili-inhabited district where mujahedin dominance had created grievances, a most weird battle was fought. The Northern Alliance, which was standing against the advancing Taleban and their full control of the country following the fall of Kabul the previous year, repulsed an unexpected attack from the Pakistani side of the border. The invaders were a mixed army of Taleban and local Ismailis who had been living as refugees in Chitral, and who had formed this highly unlikely alliance out of resentment at mujahedin abuses. Opposing them and defending the top of the Shah-e Salim pass, they found other Ismailis, this time loyal Jamiat-e Islami fighters from Warduj district who had deployed together with their Sunni brothers-in-arms.

Of course nowadays, Ismailis are not even slightly as isolated and repressed as then. Their rights have been enshrined in the Constitution and there is not the slightest chance that some of them can entertain the desperate thought of supporting the Taleban to redress wrongs. Now, it is rather some former mujahedin from Warduj who have joined the Taleban insurgency. The insurgents in Warduj (read our blogs [here](#) and [here](#)) have become another major burden on the lives of all people living in the border districts who have to travel through that ill-fated district to get to the rest of Afghanistan. The district has also become a contested battleground for the Afghan security forces, in this otherwise peaceful province (read [here](#) and [here](#)). The choice of Warduji militants to join the Taleban - when they do not have a previous record of affiliation or have been recently radicalised - is reportedly also influenced by controversial appointments at the district security level - in this case, too, the result of competition and turf wars among rival smuggling-cum-political networks.

In fact, this story from Ishkashim is not about local sectarian or ethnic divides, nor about a single group or place. It is not a B-movie either. Rather this is one example of the reality of the lives of many communities who have been left alone by the government because they live in places which are isolated and not strategic - or worse, whose strategic value lies in illegal business. These are places where a reform of the system of how key government positions get filled will not come soon. Locals may get a second victory – not just forcing the finding of the suspected robber, but also the removal of the ineffective district officials – in the wake of their protests. But from here to actually removing from Ishkashim's beautiful landscape the bigger criminal networks who have penetrated the state institutions would need a longer and far harder civil

struggle.

(1) The chief of the border police traditionally holds a major importance in the frontier town of Ishkashim because of the means at his disposal as commander of the battalion headquarters for all the Pamir border zone (from Darwaz to Wakhan, and southwards to Zibak). He can also play a pivotal role in the trans-border narco-trafficking, which constitutes the major 'asset' of Ishkashim.

(2) District governor, Mir Ahmad Jawad, had been previously appointed to the same position in Argu, whence he was driven out by popular protest. Locals complained to AAN that he is young and owes his position more to his connections than qualifications.

(3) Ismailis in Badakhshan have a long history of association with education and one could joke that their districts export a surplus of teachers in exchange for other areas' surplus warlords (read also our previous blog [here](#)).