

## **Andijan Activist Arrested as Uzbek Purge Continues**

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The Uzbek authorities are using run-of-the-mill criminal charges to silence their critics. An opposition activist in Andijan appears to be next on the Uzbek authorities' list as they continue the nationwide purge that began after violence in the city last year

Shokirjon Muminjonov, a member of the opposition Birlik party, has undergone repeated questioning since June 3 after police said they found cannabis plants in his garden.

Opposition members are in little doubt that the charge has been invented as a way of isolating and possibly imprisoning Muminjonov, in a pattern that human rights groups say has been repeated again and again in the last year.

"I live in a multi-storey building in the district centre of Jalalkuduk," said Muminjonov, who heads the local branch of Birlik there. "There's a plot of land next to our building, where I grow vegetables. It doesn't have a fence and it's accessible to anyone. On June 3, several police officers came to my house and told me that plants containing a narcotic substance were growing in my garden. When I looked, I did indeed find five or six wild cannabis plants about 15 or 20 centimetres tall.

"The chief of the police squad immediately took my passport and asked me to come in for questioning. Since then, I have been going to the police every day, and they ask me how these plants came to be in my garden."

During the search, police did not fill out an official report or remove the plants for examination, according to Muminjonov.

He is being questioned by the police department responsible for combating terrorism, which deals with political cases rather than ordinary crimes. "They asked me about Birlik members and demanded that I write a list of the ones in Jalalkuduk district," he said.

"During questioning, the investigator has threatened me several times, saying, 'Unless you give us a list of party members, we will put you in jail for growing illegal plants in your garden.'"

A local human rights activist who knows Muminjonov said, "Shokirjon Muminjonov has worked as a schoolteacher for around 40 years, and he is very respectable person. Just imagine, he doesn't even smoke and suddenly he is accused of growing cannabis. As everyone knows, wild cannabis grows everywhere, and you can even see it on the edges of cotton fields."

After May 2005, when security forces are believed to have killed several hundred people when they opened fire on crowds of demonstrators in central Andijan, the authorities began by arresting anyone they believed was involved in the protest, but then moved on to human rights activists and other dissenters both here and in the rest of the country.

Especially in cases with no plausible connection to the Andijan protest, prosecutors have filed criminal charges unrelated to the individual's political activity or human rights work.

This pattern was noted by the United States-based watchdog Human Rights Watch in a press release issued this week which highlighted three recent cases. Azam Farmonov and Alisher Karamatov, members of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan in the Syrdarya region, received prison sentences of nine years each on June 15, officially for extortion. A third man, Yadgar Turlibekov, was arrested in neighbouring Kashkadarya region.

In Andijan itself, the son of Saidjahon Zainabitdinov, a human rights activist given a seven-year sentence in January after speaking out about the Andijan massacre, has also been arrested in recent weeks, Human Rights Watch reported. Ilhom Zainabitdinov has been charged with forging banknotes and documents.

"The Uzbek government has a long record of harassing human rights organisations that has intensified since the Andijan massacre," said Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "In some cases, the government presses charges directly related to defenders' human rights work, and in others it accuses them of extortion or financial misdeeds."

As a result of the ongoing purge, many Birlik members in Andijan region have been detained or have fled the country.

Birlik and the other major opposition party, Erk, have survived since the early Nineties despite numerous arrests and their leaders being forced into exile.

After the Andijan violence, the regional branch of Birlik incidents distributed a critical statement which they distributed and also passed to the regional governor. The local authorities immediately arrested the party's regional chief Akbarjan Oripov, and three district branch officers, Nurmuhammad Azizov, Musajan Babajanov, and Dilmurod Muhiddinov. All three were subsequently charged with the serious offence of "undermining the constitutional system", and in January - after eight months in custody - Muhiddinov got a five-year jail sentence and the other two were released with three-year suspended sentences.

"In the Andijan region, Birlik had 6,500 registered members," said Oripov. "After events in Andijan, they were all persecuted by the authorities. Some were arrested on various trumped-up charges, some left Uzbekistan and many went to Russia and Kazakstan as migrant workers."

The Erk party's head in Andijan, Isroiljan Khaldarov, left the country after being held for two days and fined for "resisting police officers" in October.

Before Andijan, Birlik was just about tolerated as an unregistered group rather than a political party, while Erk - although formally banned - also had members across the country. Now the authorities are clearly not prepared to allow them to exist even in the shadows.

Togboy Razzakov, a Birlik member now living outside Uzbekistan, recalls how the opposition first began in the late Eighties, only to have the new regime hijack part of its agenda and crush the movement itself soon after independence in 1991.

“I joined the opposition movements back in the Soviet era. We were fighting for independence, to make Uzbek the official language, and to democratise society,” he said. “We in the opposition had a substantive programme for the country to emerge from crisis. [President] Islam Karimov stole this programme from us, and suppressed the people who’d created it. The Birlik movement.... continues to be repressed by the dictatorial regime.

“There are now three officers from the [interior ministry] police or the National Security Service for every one opposition member in Andijan. So I too have had to leave Uzbekistan, and now live outside the republic.”

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