

Jailed Uzbek Dissident Defiant

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Uzbekistan's most famous imprisoned dissident, Muhammad Bekjanov, vows to continue his political struggle.

A tall, swarthy man, Muhammad Bekjanov received his hospital visitors gracefully, though his eyes betrayed the misery and pain he has endured over the past four years.

Bekjanov is Uzbekistan's most famous political prisoner, confined to a prison hospital with the tuberculosis he has contracted after spending months on end in damp cellars.

In his first interview since he was jailed in 1999, Bekjanov was defiant in spite of his ill health. He told IWPR he had done nothing to deserve his conviction, and planned to continue working for the political opposition when he gets out.

At first sight Bekjanov, 49, looks haggard and has aged noticeably since his detention, but he is not as thin as other visitors have reported. Since earlier this year he has been in a ward for 40 tuberculosis patients, part of the Tashkent prison hospital which houses 3,000 sick convicts.

The fact that the authorities allowed IWPR to visit Bekjanov was an event in itself. Officials in charge of the penal system in Uzbekistan's interior ministry stressed that it was the result of an ongoing liberalisation of prisons. Before the interview began, the head doctor at the prison hospital, Rustam Umarov, pointed out a sign with Bekjanov's name on it on one of the ward beds, as a way of confirming that he had been allocated one of the better places, on the bottom row of bunks.

Before being hospitalised Bekjanov was in five different jails, where he says torture, ill-treatment and backbreaking forced labour were the norm. He remembers each one only by how much he was beaten and harassed there.

"I don't want to relive in detail how I was tortured," he said. "I will simply say that as a result of beatings, I can't hear in my right ear. In the Jaslyk prison in 2000, I was beaten every day. My leg was broken, I wasn't given treatment, and the bone only grew back together after a year."

He is adamant that he was jailed only for his political activism as a member of Uzbekistan's beleaguered opposition. "My involvement in politics - in the opposition - is the reason why I am here, and why our family has been treated so harshly," he said.

In August 1999, he and his brother Rashid were given jail terms of 15 and 12 years respectively after being convicted of involvement in a series of bombings which rocked government buildings in Tashkent in February that year. A third brother, Kamil Bekjanov, was imprisoned for 10 years for possession of narcotics and weapons at about the same time.

All three convictions were condemned by human rights groups, who said the cases were fabricated in order to punish a fourth brother, leading dissident Muhammad Salih, the leader of the opposition party Erk. Salih, who lives in exile in Norway, was sentenced to 15 years in absentia over the Tashkent bombings. There is little objective evidence to connect any of them with the bombings.

"They were put in jail only because they are Muhammad Salih's brothers," said Mahbuba Kasymova of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights in Uzbekistan.

Salih and his Erk party have been hounded by the Uzbek government ever since he dared to stand against the incumbent Islam Karimov in the 1991 presidential election.

"I know my brother and I can imagine how difficult it is for him because of what has happened to our family," said Muhammad Bekjanov.

In 1994, mounting government harassment forced Salih to flee, and since then he has lived in relative safety in Europe, although even there the Uzbek authorities have pursued him. In 2001, he was arrested on an Interpol warrant while visiting the Czech Republic. The Czech authorities threw the extradition request out, and President Vaclav Havel - a poet and communist-era dissident like Salih - spoke up on his behalf.

"The day he is arrested, we will be wiped off the face of the earth," warned Bekjanov. "But the authorities have not been able to do that yet, since they fear the international reaction. The world acknowledges Salih as a legitimate rival to Karimov."

Bekjanov has another nine years left to serve, after the authorities reduced his sentence by two years. If he survives the tuberculosis and his remaining jail term, he insists that he will return to politics, " There is no democracy in Uzbekistan today... I think that the goals of the democratic Erk party are even more relevant now, and I will continue my political activity when I leave prison."

In the early 1990s Bekjanov worked alongside his more famous brother in Uzbekistan, publishing the Erk party's newspaper. By the time of the Tashkent bombings he had been living in exile in Ukraine for years, and was no longer involved in the opposition.

"In 1995, I published our newspaper in Kiev for six months. Then I stopped and you could say I completely abandoned politics, devoting myself to my small business," he continued.

"I didn't expect this (arrest), even when I heard that the Erk party had been accused of organizing the explosions. If I had been responsible, I would have left Kiev, but I stayed there, and on March 15 (1999) I was arrested and later extradited to Uzbekistan."

While one brother, Rashid, remains in prison, the other, Kamil Bekjanov, was let out under a general amnesty last year. He returned to the northern province of Khorezm where he and his brothers come from, and where he worked as a farmer until his arrest.

Kamil has found it hard to re-adjust to life on the outside. In the four years he spent in prison, the farm fell into disuse as his family sold off livestock so they could visit him and his brothers.

Now in poor health, he is unable to pay for proper medical treatment and hasn't the energy to rebuild the farm business. What makes things worse is the way he has been ostracised for his association with a family of political outcasts, even though he was never involved in politics. Former friends and neighbours fear the consequences of having too much contact with someone branded as a criminal.

"I waited so long for that day, for my return home, but everything has changed so much in the years that have passed. People, especially, have changed. They avoid me, and I constantly sense an unfriendly atmosphere around me," Kamil told IWPR, shaking his head.

"In that sense, the situation in prison is easier. People hate you, but they hate you openly. You don't need to hide or be ashamed of the fact that you're a political prisoner, the brother of Muhammad Salih.

"It's absurd, but I think that in prison I felt better mentally."

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