

## **Kazak State Cracks Down on Dissent**

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Protestors and journalists arrested after public anger at farmland reforms.

Kazakhstan has seen the worst social unrest in years over proposed land legislation that many citizens see as threatening their national sovereignty.

The authorities reacted harshly to a series of protests in cities around Kazakhstan, with reports of mass arrests and intimidation.

Such protests are rare in relatively prosperous Kazakhstan. The last serious unrest was in 2011, when oil workers in Zhanaozen protested over work conditions.

(See also [Simmering Tensions Boil Over in Kazakhstan](#) and [Strikes Take Toll on Kazak Oil Town](#)).

The current strife was sparked by proposed legislation to significantly relax laws on non-Kazaks renting or owning agricultural land.

Until amendments in 2011, only Kazak citizens could lease or buy farmlands. Since then, foreigners have been able to rent agricultural land for up to ten years. The new provisions would have extended this to 25 years.

The proposals touched sensitivities about Chinese appropriation of Kazak natural resources; over the past decade China has become one of the leading investors in Central Asia.

But it also fed into public disquiet over last year's devaluation of the national tenge currency and the country's economic downturn.

### **HARSH RESPONSE**

Kazakhstan already has strict laws on public assembly. Unauthorised gatherings are banned under civil law and the "breach of public order" is a criminal offence.

After scattered protests by some 1,000 people around the country in late April, activists in several cities requested permission to hold further rallies to protest the proposed change in the land law.

These were all refused, meaning that any gatherings would by default be unauthorised.

Organisers were then called to their local state prosecutor offices, where they were warned they faced criminal and civil charges if they took part in such protests.

Nonetheless, the first round of protests in April seemed to spur the government into attempted action to assuage public fears over the new legislation.

National economy minister Erbolat Dosaev and his deputy Kairbek Uskenbaev resigned and on May 5, President Nursultan Nazarbaev said the bill would now be delayed until 2017.

A special 75-member commission on land reform was also created to craft possible amendments.

However, this failed to satisfy the public mood, with protestors continuing to insist that the new legislation be abandoned entirely.

Experts warned that the government was not addressing the real causes of unrest.

"The authorities are backtracking: the president declared a moratorium on the land amendments, and a commission on the issues of land was established," said Andrei Grishin, staff member at the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and Rule of Law. "But that doesn't solve the problem."

The underlying cause was a wider dissatisfaction, he said, adding that "the land issue was just a way to express discontent over the economic situation and Nazarbaev's politics. The authorities find this particularly intimidating, that is why unprecedented measures were put in place ahead of the May 21 protests".

### **UNSANCTIONED DISSENT**

The interior ministry announced on May 20 that police had found arms caches near the Almaty central

squares of Respublika and Astana, widely disseminating footage of the petrol bombs, metal rods and gas containers these stashes reportedly contained.

On the day itself, the internet was shut down across the country and police cordoned off the main squares in all cities where protests were due to be held.

Although some people managed to access the squares, the protests in Almaty and Astana - as well as the cities of Pavlodar, Kostanay and Uralsk - were short-lived as police quickly moved in to arrest and remove participants.

According to the interior ministry, 40 activists were arrested and detained for taking part in unsanctioned rallies across the country. Some 20 media workers covering the events were also detained for a few hours.

Human rights groups said that the real number of arrests was likely to be much higher.

Grishin, who attended the Almaty protest on May 21 as an observer, agreed that only a relatively small number turned up, between 500-1,000 people.

Nonetheless, the police spent the first hour-and-a-half of the rally picking out the most active participants and putting them into police vans.

“Over the next half hour the police arrested the rest of the protestors, including senior citizens and journalists. Then they were taken to different police stations, and within three hours, after gathering explanatory reports, were released,” Grishin continued.

Igor Lepeha, who heads Interior Ministry’s Department of Administrative Offences told reporters that “there had been no protests in Kazakstan” on May 21.

The journalists, he said, had been arrested “by mistake”.

Zhanna Baitelova, who heads the Guild of Court Reporters NGO, was also present at the Almaty protest as an observer.

“The interior ministry said there were no protests. Some TV channels showed footage of empty squares to support these statements. [The internet was blocked] to prevent the truth getting out - that the square was not empty because there was no dissatisfaction, but rather because the police blocked all approaches to the square and arrested peaceful people,” she said.

She told IWPR that she had been unable to post developments on social media during the protests.

“One couldn’t upload photo and video on Facebook around 12 pm. That’s why my posts were two or three hours late. YouTube wasn’t accessible either,” she said, adding, “It’s clear that blocking the internet was meant to stop information spreading about the people who went out to express their opinion.”

#### **Gaziza Baituova is an IWPR contributor in Almaty.**

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**Location:** [Kazakstan](#)

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