

## **Kazak Writer in Hiding**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Two books penned by an outspoken Kazak novelist have caused the Astana government considerable embarrassment

A Kazak novelist famous for his sensational revelations of alleged government corruption has gone into hiding after a court jailed him for two years on charges of "hooliganism".

Temirtas Tleulesov has been widely hailed as the latest martyr in an ongoing campaign by the Kazak authorities to neutralise the political opposition and restrict freedom of speech.

However, Tleulesov's supporters say that the fugitive remains defiant and is planning to write a sequel to his last book, "The Shymkent Mafia", which will focus on allegedly gross violations of electoral law in southern Kazakstan.

This region has formed the backdrop for Tleulesov's best known works which have caused substantial embarrassment to Nursultan Nazarbaev's regime in Astana.

"The Snake's Lair" is recognised as a daring exposé of corruption and tribalism while "The Shymkent Mafia" openly accuses senior officials in southern Kazakstan of accepting bribes. Many of the officials named in the book now hold influential posts in the Kazak government.

Despite the fact that the novel was dismissed by Judge Berik Bektasov as "mere populism", the allegations prompted a police investigation which, according to the author, failed to disprove any of the facts quoted in the book.

Tleulesov says that the republic's previous prosecutor general, Yuri Khitrin, was given the opportunity to read the manuscript of "The Shymkent Mafia" before it was published.

The novelist has also claimed that, while he was still writing the book, two attempts were made on his life and he was badly beaten on several occasions. Furthermore, police brought two criminal charges against him and, says Tleulesov, a senior regional official offered him a \$200,000 bribe.

After "The Shymkent Mafia" came out, Tleulesov was arrested on charges of "hooliganism" and sentenced to two years in jail. However, he broke his bail conditions before the sentence was passed and went into hiding. Political analyst Alexei Goncharov said the novelist currently enjoys widespread support from a number of opposition leaders who are organising a pressure group to appeal against his conviction.

Earlier this month, city officials in Shymkent, southern Kazakstan, refused to grant permission for a demonstration in support of Tleulesov - the second such rally to be banned.

The authorities, it seems, are determined to drive the novelist into a corner and set a clear precedent for any future assaults on the government's integrity - especially in view of the "holy war" which the Nazarbaev regime has declared on corruption. In April last year, the president called on the law enforcement bodies to "deal with anyone who attempted to slander or defame the government". And he has received the wholehearted support of the pro-government Otan party in this initiative.

Otan leaders subsequently lashed out at an appeal made by 33 chosen representatives of the Kazak people who criticised the government for riding roughshod over democratic principles.

Sergei Tereshchenko, the leader of the Otan party and former premier, described the appeal as an "insult" and accused the opposition leaders of attempting to destabilise the country.

However, many analysts agree that the Kazak authorities have launched a premeditated campaign to silence any murmurs of dissent in political and media circles.

The political commentator Olga Simakova says the conflict between the independent press, the political opposition and the Kazak authorities is becoming increasingly open - especially in the light of recent media law amendments which are currently being hurried through the Kazak parliament.

The proposed legislation has prompted a fierce backlash in Kazak media circles. At a meeting of SolDat newspaper editors on February 6, the political scientist Nurbolat Masanov called on the local journalistic community to defend the independent press and freedom of speech in the republic. The growing outcry, supported by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, caused the authorities to postpone its January discussion of the media bill but most analysts agree that this is nothing but a stay of execution.

The pessimists say that the fate of the independent media in Kazakhstan is already decided and soon both opposition politicians and journalists will have to choose between prison and emigration.

Certainly, the Kazak authorities have managed to compromise most of the leading figures in the Forum of Democratic Forces, which unites all the main opposition parties. They also devote considerable efforts to blocking the popular website Eurasia internet which continues to publish objective and balanced criticism of government policies.

Meanwhile, the regime misses no opportunity to bang its own ideological drum, insisting that Kazakhstan is "an oasis of stability" and a "magnet for investment". And there are fewer and fewer voices left to argue with them.

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