

Kazakhstan: Financial Police Under Fire

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Opposition party members claim their businesses have been targeted by the authorities.

A Kazak opposition leader has accused the government of using its financial police to persecute associates as part of a strategy to weaken critics of the authorities.

Well-known businessman Bulat Abilov said the police agency - led by Colonel Boltabek Bulgakbaev, a man close to the president's circle - was hounding employees of firms affiliated to the Butya company, which Abilov founded.

Last year, Abilov, who leads the Ak Jol party, was one of a group of young, high-ranking former officials and business people who founded the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, DCK, in direct opposition to President Nursultan Nazarbaev's regime.

Abilov told IWPR that as soon as the new party was established, the government began a policy of economic harassment of senior DCK members and their business associates. He said he had seen letters "with direct instructions from the prosecutor's office and the financial police" to this effect.

Nazarbaev set up the Financial Police Agency, FPA, in January 2001 as a central executive body, acting separately from the government. Previous institutions such as the tax police were abolished and their functions and authority transferred to the FPA, which was then charged with protecting the legal rights and interests of citizens.

However, the FPA is also believed to be used unofficially as a tool to control the activities of the politicised business elite. According to Pyotr Svoik, leader of the Azamat party, this was partly because the Kazak interior ministry was thought to have "lost the professionalism it once had".

Arat Narmanbetov, a former member of the KGB successor the National Security Committee, said the financial police was introduced as the government's main weapon against the opposition after Bulgakbaev was appointed as its head on November 11, 2001.

"He doesn't make the decisions himself - they are sent down from the top - but he performs them with enormous zeal to gain favour," Narmanbetov told IWPR. "As a result, the officers of this department have always tended to exceed their authority."

This has sparked numerous complaints, both inside and outside parliament. Assembly deputy Tagir Sisinbaev said he had heard "numerous complaints" about the financial police but could do nothing about them. "Their activity is no longer regulated by law, as they have been defined as an independent law-enforcement body - and they are now acting outside the law," he said.

Vladimir Levin, an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, consultant for human rights in Kazakhstan, said he had received several reports of law violations by financial police employees. "They do whatever they want," he claimed.

"People appeal to (the OSCE) human rights commission because the financial police literally use sadistic

methods when they make tax checks - some people even lose consciousness."

Some observers date the start of this unofficial campaign against DCK businessmen to a meeting held by various Kazak opposition groups late last year. After a criminal case was opened against DCK leader Mukhtar Ablyazov, many of his colleagues suddenly found their businesses were closed down through intimidation, accusations of fraud or other unscrupulous means.

At the end of March this year, in a discussion of a bill on the financial police, parliamentary deputy Rakhmet Mukashev questioned whether the organisation was needed and suggested it might be abolished.

FPA workers are quick to defend their department. Its deputy head, Bakhytjan Junusbekov, said employees were strictly vetted for their professionalism and ability. "When anyone starts work at the service there is a thorough examination of his personal qualities," he said. "We take all the necessary measures to ensure our employees do not break the law."

Political scientist Nurbolat Masanov told IWPR that Nazarbaev and his cronies were going after the business elite and former state officials because they feared the growth of political rivals "in the rising class of the bourgeoisie, and they are trying to stop it from becoming established".

The president has insisted he is a good friend to industry but in spite of his reassuring tone, economic analyst Tulegen Askarov claims many businessmen have been alienated by the FPA's heavy-handed activities and are moving their companies into Russia. "There is more incentive for attracting capital there," he said.

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