

## **Kazakhstan: More Pressure on Government Critics**

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After demolishing political opposition, authorities turn on other critical voices.

In recent months, the authorities in Kazakhstan have widened the net of repression beyond their political opponents to take in human rights defenders and others, according to a group that monitors individual cases and trends.

Towards the end of last year, the opposition party Alga was shut down, its leader Vladimir Kozlov jailed, and a number of media outlets sympathetic to the opposition were forced to close. In an interview for IWPR, Mahambet Abjan, who monitors cases of harassment, detention and prosecution for the human rights group Kadir-Kasiet, described the trends he had been observing.

### **What's the general trend in the human rights situation?**

Our monitoring of the situation indicates that threats towards activists have increased. Previously, activists used to be detained during a protest or immediately afterwards, but in recent months they've been picked up before they leave home or while on their way to the demonstration.

Previously, it was possible for a group to go to a government institution to hand in a petition. But now those behind petitions that are to be submitted to local government or some other public body are detained and jailed for several days.

It used to be the case that anyone who criticised government policies but did not call for the cabinet or the president to resign would not be persecuted. It seems to be their turn now, since the more radical opposition members have been dealt with.

The arrest of Murat Telibekov, head of the Union of Kazakhstan Muslims sets a new precedent and demonstrates that the space for criticising the authorities is narrowing. His protests used to be tolerated. [Telibekov was released on June 11 after being held for a week for arranging a rally.]

Other faith group leaders and activists are also facing prosecution under the 2011 law on religious activity and faith organisations.

### **What forms of pressure do you see as most worrying?**

I would say the most worrying case is that of Roza Tuletaeva, the trade union activist and leading figure in the [2011] oil workers' strike in Janaozen, who has been diagnosed with a benign liver tumour but is being denied medical treatment by the prison staff. During her trial, she said she had been subjected to torture. Now she is in grave condition but she's still being forced to take part in daily roll calls.

**Your report lists human rights defenders who are under pressure, including Yevgeny Zhovtis, founder and former director of the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, and well-known journalist and government critic Sergei Duvanov. They were cautioned for organising the Freedom Award event and were warned that they might face criminal charges of money-laundering. Why were the authorities opposed to this event?**

One reason is that the [seven] nominees included people from Janaozen and [nearby] Shetpe. They include Alexander Bozhenko, who was killed after refusing to testify against the Janaozen demonstrators, in the face of threats from investigators. Then there is Torebek Tolegenov, a fireman who switched side and joined the protests [in Janaozen, December 2011], and was shot dead by police.

Bringing these things back to the public's attention has undoubtedly angered the authorities.

The Freedom Award was supposedly funded by [exiled banker and opposition figure] Mukhtar Ablyazov, so the money is seen as illegal [by the authorities] and the awards as money-laundering. The prosecution statement was based on supposition, and it offered no documentary evidence.

[Winners of the Freedom Prize were announced on May 31, although the event itself never took place.]

### **Tell us more about the recently-published list of political prisoners.**

On May 31, nine human rights defenders and journalists set up the Tirek Alliance to compile a list of political prisoners. Their [website](#) says the intention is to focus much-needed attention on these individuals and provide assistance to them.

There are six people on the list: [writer] Aron Atabek, Vladimir Kozlov, Janaozen strike leaders Roza Tuletaeva and Maksat Dosmagambetov, human rights defenders Vadim Kurmashin and Alexander Kharlamov.

Kharlamov has not yet been convicted, and is currently in pre-trial detention.

**Does Kadir-Kasiet only conduct monitoring, or is it involved in other activities as well?**

Apart from monitoring the situation, we provide support for activists who find themselves under pressure. We pay for a lawyer, contribute towards their communication costs, and help them install reinforced steel doors and CCTV at their homes if they need that.

This year, we ran a month-long campaign to help three journalists in the cities of Jezkazgan, Aktobe and Uralsk.

**Interview conducted by Saule Mukhametrakhimova, IWPR Central Asia editor in London.**

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