

## **Kazakhstan: Opposition Activist Jailed**

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Harsh verdict for government opponent intended as message to others.

An opposition leader in Kazakhstan, Vladimir Kozlov, has been sentenced to seven-and-a-half years imprisonment after a conviction roundly criticised by international watchdogs.

Alga party leader Kozlov, 52, was sentenced on October 8 after a court in the western city of Aktau found him guilty of orchestrating dissent among striking oil workers last year. The court also ordered the seizure of assets including apartments and cars registered in his name but belonging to Alga, which has been denied legal registration.

The charges against him included inciting social strife, calling for the forcible overthrow of the government and setting up a criminal group. The implication is that his actions contributed to disturbances in the town of Janaozen in December in which police fired into crowds of demonstrators, leaving 16 dead.

Kozlov maintains his innocence, saying the prosecution was politically motivated.

Two other defendants in the same trial were also found guilty. Akjanat Aminov, 55, an oil worker from Janaozen, was convicted of the same three charges as Kozlov. He was given a five year suspended sentence, during which time he is required to report to police regularly.

Serik Sapargali, a 60-year-old civil society activist, was found guilty of one charge of calling for government to be overthrown, and got a four year suspended sentence. Aminov had confessed to the charges and Sapargali had admitted partial fault.

Aminov and Sapargali were released on the spot.

Kozlov's fellow party members called his sentence "outrageous" and pledged to continue fighting for his release.

The verdict raised concerns in the international community. The New York-based watchdog Human Rights Watch called it "a blow to freedom of expression and pluralism of political voices in Kazakhstan".

"Kozlov is paying a heavy price for publicly criticising the Kazak government," the group's Europe and Central Asia researcher Mihra Rittman said.

The United States embassy in Kazakhstan issued a statement expressing concern at "the apparent use of the criminal system to silence opposition voices".

At a press briefing on October 9, Kazak prosecution service spokesman Nurdaulet Syndikov denied that Kozlov's conviction had anything to do with politics.

However, political analysts in the country note the discrepancy between the sentences handed down to Kozlov and to his co-defendants – perhaps a sign that the real aim is to deal a death blow to Alga, the most vocal and uncompromising of Kazakhstan's opposition forces.

In a television interview shown on October 7, the day before the verdict, President Nursultan Nazarbaev described last year's events in Janaozen as an industrial dispute hijacked by individuals with "malicious intent, pursuing their own criminal aims." This was a clear reference to Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former banker and a staunch Nazarbaev opponent now living in exile. He featured in the prosecution case as the alleged mastermind of subversive actions designed to bring down the current administration.

Ablyazov made international headlines when he was sentenced to 22 months in jail in Britain in February for contempt of court. He is accused of embezzling billions of US dollars from the BTA bank in Kazakhstan, which he denies.

Unlike other, more moderate opposition forces, Alga has consistently levelled its criticism at President Nazarbaev himself.

"For the small handful of people still left in the opposition, Kozlov's trial is a clear sign that the authorities will always find a way of getting rid of opponents who cross a certain line and are seen as a threat to the regime," Andrei Grishin of the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law told IWPR.

Grishin said everything about Kozlov annoyed the authorities – his refusal to plead guilty at trial, his role as

Alga party leader, and his links with Ablyazov, which he did not deny during the proceedings.

“The saddest part is that there’s almost nothing left of the opposition. Alga has all but ceased to exist,” Grishin said, adding that the other main opposition force is OSDP-Azat which is seen as more prepared to strike deals with the government.

Grishin said it was not really criticism the authorities were worried about – that was something they had learned to ignore. Instead, he said, “for them the bigger threat comes when people rally behind opposition slogans”.

This case was the last in a cycle of trials that came out of the Janaozen violence. Thirteen local people accused of inciting the unrest were sentenced to jail terms on June 4. Eleven men were convicted in May at a separate trial concerning Shetpe, a village near Janaozen which saw smaller-scale violence in December 2011.

The only trial involving police implicated in the shootings ended in late May with five officers sentenced to between five and seven years for overstepping their authority. Another officer was given five years for detaining people illegally in Janaozen.

Numerous questions remain unanswered about Janaozen – why the police were instructed to use firearms against civilians, the true number of casualties, and the role that local and central government played by ignoring the economic roots of dissatisfaction. To date, the government has dealt with these concerns by blaming the opposition and labour activists.

“It is too early to close the chapter on these events, as the public has not had full answers, and it’s doubtful that they fully subscribe to the accusations made by prosecutors,” Grishin said. “Everyone is pretty well aware that Kozlov and his party made convenient scapegoats to be blamed for [the authorities’] own wrongdoings and inability to resolve conflict.”

As for the future of political opposition in Kazakhstan, Grishin said that “because Alga has been broken up, it will of course take some time for a similar force to emerge. But there’s no shortage of people dissatisfied with the authorities, so there will be other movements like it.”

More broadly, he said, “strikes that have taken place since Janaozen show that people are ready to stand up for their labour rights and that employers – unlike the government – have taken notice and make efforts to reach a compromise.”

**Almaz Kumenov is IWPR Kazakhstan editor.**

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