

Kazakhstan: Opposition Leaders Behind Bars

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Opposition forces in Kazakhstan unbowed by detention of prominent leaders.

Kazakhstan's most successful opposition movement, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, DCK, has vowed to keep up the campaign for democratic reforms, despite the detention of two of the party's key representatives.

Mukhtar Abliazov, DCK leader and former Kazakh energy minister, was handed a six-year jail sentence on July 18, after being found guilty of fraud and abusing his position when in office. In addition, Abliazov was ordered to pay damages of 557 million tenge (approximately 1.5 million US dollars) to the KEGOK oil company and a further 150,000 tenge in legal costs.

Three days earlier the trial of another DCK leader, Galymzhan Zhakianov, ex-governor of the northern Pavlodar province, got underway. Zhakianov also faces abuse of power charges.

Abliazov's jailing comes one year after the last serious blow to the opposition leadership - the conviction in absentia of the former premier Akezhan Kazhelgeldin, head of the Republican People's Party, who has been campaigning in exile since he was forced out of the country in 1997.

Many analysts and opposition figures believe the charges against Abliazov and Zhakianov are politically motivated, prompted by the success of the DCK in unifying Kazakhstan's previously disparate opposition forces.

"In the past, the opposition was scattered and couldn't oppose the government properly. However, the DCK's make-up and intellectual and material resources rallied activists," said Nikolai Ponomorenko, an independent political scientist.

According to Rozlana Taukina, president of the association for independent electronic media in Kazakhstan and a DCK member, the movement has brought together over eight opposition parties and now boasts over 12,000 members. "The opposition became unified around the DCK in response to the drastic shift towards authoritarianism," she said.

The party is confident that further repression could backfire on the government. "The more radical the government's actions are towards the DCK, the more radical will be the response," warned Vladimir Kozlov, the party's press secretary.

Independent analyst Anna Volkova believes the DCK leaders' campaign for democratic reforms contributed to their detention, but suspects another important factor was their knowledge, as former officials, of the ins and outs of state corruption. "This explains the government's eagerness to lock them up," she said.

For now parliamentary deputy Tolen Tokhtasynov says the leadership of the DCK has been entrusted to him. "We do not intend to choose new leaders - Zhakianov and Abliazov are still in charge," he said.

But Maxim Volkov, political correspondent on the pro-government newspaper *Novoye Pokolenie* (New Generation), is sceptical that Tokhtasynov can hold the fort. "It is unlikely that Tokhtasynov will stay in this

position for very long. He could soon face the same fate as Zhakianov and Abliazov," he said. "This movement will fall apart soon because there are no personalities or organisations in the country capable of standing up to pressure from the state machine."

Other analysts, however, are more optimistic about the opposition's prospects, sensing the government's actions are a sign of desperation.

Andrei Chebotarev, an analyst at the international organisation Transparency Kazakhstan, reckons the Republican People's Party and Azamat feel the authorities are faltering under pressure from the opposition.

"This is shown in the primitive methods the government has used to suppress its critics, methods which the international community is already watching with alarm," he said.

Andrei Makarov, an independent political scientist, said, "The government thinks the opposition will be frightened and will pipe down without Zhakianov and Abliazov. But their imprisonment will only redouble the fight for democracy."

Medet Ibragimov and Aleksei Gorodetski are pseudonyms for journalists in Kazakhstan.

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