

Politics May Cloud Truth in Kyrgyz Murder Inquiry

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As suspicions grow about the possible involvement of Tashkent in Alisher Saipov's death, there is concern that a thorough investigation will prove politically impossible.

Despite the high priority given to the investigation into the killing of leading journalist Alisher Saipov in southern Kyrgyzstan, there are fears that the investigation will be inconclusive because lines of enquiry leading into neighbouring Uzbekistan will not be followed up.

A Kyrgyz interior ministry spokesman has suggested one possible lead – that the Uzbek secret police came across the border and assassinated Saipov, who was shot dead on October 24 in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. Many analysts interviewed by IWPR agree this is a strong possibility, but fear the police will not be able to take the matter much further both because the Uzbek authorities will be uncooperative, and because their own government will not want to strain an already difficult diplomatic relationship.

Saipov worked with Fergana.ru, a major Russian-language website covering Central Asia, as well as with Radio Liberty and Voice of America. Earlier this year, he founded a newspaper called Siyosat (Politics) that covered events in Uzbekistan as well as his native Kyrgyzstan. Siyosat circulated widely in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley, which adjoins the Osh region.

The authorities in Uzbekistan – who heavily censor domestic media – were clearly annoyed by the emergence of an independent, critical publication which was all the more accessible to local readers because it was in Uzbek.

The Kyrgyz authorities are taking the murder seriously, and President Kurmanbek Bakiev will personally oversee the police investigation. "We will not allow criminals to intimidate people by killing journalists," he said. Major-General Omurbek Suvanaliev, who heads the defence and security affairs department in the presidential administration, has been dispatched to Osh.

SAIPOV REPORTED THREATS TO HIS LIFE

The Kyrgyz interior ministry says it is looking at a number of possible motives, and spokesman Bakyt Seitov told the Reuters news agency that the Uzbek secret service might have been involved.

"One of the versions is the possibility of involvement of Uzbek security services, because he constantly criticised Karimov's policies and the Uzbek government in his newspaper," Seitov told the agency, in a report from October 29.

Kyrgyzstan's human rights ombudsman, Tursunbay Bakir Uulu, has cited his own country's secret service as saying its Uzbek counterparts "ordered the journalist's murder".

Colleagues and relatives of the late Saipov say he told them on several occasions that he had been threatened by the Uzbek security service over his critical reporting of the political system in Uzbekistan.

“Just two days before he was shot dead, Alisher Saipov told his friends that he thought he was being followed by Uzbek security services. But he always said he believed he would be safe on the Kyrgyz side of the border,” the BBC’s Central Asia correspondent Natalia Antelava wrote in a dispatch.

“They wanted to kill Saipov long ago. He was a serious obstacle to the regime in Uzbekistan,” said Hulkar Isamova, an Osh journalist who produces the Rezonans programme on the local Mezon television station. “But this killing by the Uzbek intelligence services was also a deterrent for other journalists.”

Edil Baisalov, a leading Kyrgyz politician, agrees that apart from eliminating Saipov, the intention was to intimidate other journalists, especially in and around Osh.

“Now that Saipov has been killed, there is one less source of accurate information from Central Asia,” he said. “This killing is not simply retribution for his journalistic activity, it is a warning to others. The bloodthirsty, dictatorial regime is saying, ‘We have a long reach.’”

The implications of Saipov’s death on other journalists in the region is examined in “Journalist’s Murder Sets Back Free Speech in Central Asia” (RCA No. 513, 02-Nov-07 http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=340323&apc_state=henh).

WILL TASHKENT CONNECTION BE INVESTIGATED?

Having stated that the Uzbek security service is a possible culprit, Kyrgyz police investigators might now be expected to pursue this line of enquiry forcefully in Tashkent. However, few analysts in Kyrgyzstan believe this will happen.

“One can say there is an Uzbek lead in Alisher Saipov’s murder,” said Ilim Karypbekov, director of the Media Representative Institute, a non-government watchdog organisation. “I do not believe a comprehensive and objective investigation will be carried out, and there are several factors that point in that direction.”

A thorough investigation would require the Kyrgyz authorities to gain access to Uzbekistan and ask some difficult questions. Karypbekov doubts that the Kyrgyz will have the political will to pin a murder charge on the security service of a powerful neighbour on which it is economically dependent.

Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations have been fraught over many years. Tashkent has regarded Kyrgyzstan’s relatively liberal political, media and civil-society environment as a threat to its own authoritarian system, and at moments of tension has expressed its hostility by cutting crucial gas supplied to its smaller neighbour.

Tashkent was particularly concerned by the Kyrgyz revolution of March 2005, in which President Askar Akaev was ousted by opposition forces including the current head of state, Bakiev. Violence in the Fergana Valley city of Andijan in May that year, in which the Uzbek security forces shot into a crowd of demonstrators, killing hundreds, will only have reinforced Tashkent’s suspicion of popular movements that express themselves in mass protests.

PAST RECORD OF COVERT RAIDS INTO SOUTH KYRGYZSTAN

When hundreds of Uzbek refugees fled from Andijan across the border into Kyrgyzstan, Bakiev – then still only acting head of state - had to tread a careful line between his government’s international human rights obligations and Tashkent’s demand that he should not shelter people it regarded as ringleaders of the revolt.

Although some of the refugees were allowed to leave for third countries, there is evidence that the Bakiev administration quietly gave its assent for Uzbekistan’s National Security Service, SNB, to send officers into southern Kyrgyzstan to abduct individuals. (See “Andijan Refugees Sent Back to Uzbekistan”. RCA No. 462, 26-Aug-06 http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=323390&apc_state=henirca2006)

“It’s incontrovertible that the Uzbek secret service carries out certain activities in Kyrgyzstan, and that these activities go beyond the limits of the interdepartmental agreements between the two countries,” said Karypbekov.

Kadyr Malikov, an academic from Kyrgyzstan who is currently professor of political sciences and Islamic studies at Madrid University, says there have been a number of cases where the SNB has conducted raids in Kyrgyzstan sometimes with the covert agreement of the authorities there, sometimes without it.

Malikov recalled one particularly notorious incident in August 2006 - the killing of prominent Islamic cleric Mohammadrafiq Kamalov, also known as Rafiq Qori Kamoliddin. Kamolov was shot dead with two other men in what Kyrgyz security sources said was a counter-terrorism operation conducted jointly with their Uzbek counterparts.

Baisalov says such incidents establish an unfortunate precedent for Uzbek security officers to operate with impunity on Kyrgyz territory.

“Dozens of people been abducted from our territory, including Kyrgyz nationals. And every time it happens, Kyrgyzstan creates a precedent for foreign citizens and their secret service to operate with a free hand,” he said.

There is no suggestion that if the SNB is responsible for Saipov’s death, the Kyrgyz security services were complicit. But indications that they have worked together or liaised on previous operations will add to the difficulties of investigating the murder in an unbiased manner.

INVESTIGATORS TALK UP SAIPOV’S OTHER CONTACTS

Baisalov, like many of the analysts interviewed for this report, is alarmed at what looks like a concerted attempt to smear the late Saipov’s reputation in an attempt to explain away his death and deflect attention from politically problematic lines of enquiry.

“The reaction of our law-enforcement agencies indicates that they are trying to shift the blame onto some kind of extremist connections,” he said.

An October 31 statement from the Kyrgyz interior ministry hinted that Saipov had got too close to radical

Islamic groups and the Uzbek opposition-in-exile, and did not refer to other possible culprits. The statement, which listed evidence of Saipov's journalistic contacts found when police searched his office, read almost as though he himself were a crime suspect.

The statement said Saipov had been in contact with leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, in Iran. It said he was reported to have met IMU leader Tahir Yuldashev in April or May 2007 and that he "regularly received payments" from him.

The IMU is a guerrilla group that mounted a series of armed raids into Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory between 1999 and 2001. It retreated south with its Taliban allies after the United-States-led Coalition entered Afghanistan in late 2001, and is now believed to be hiding out in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, NWFP. In earlier years, Yuldashev spent time in Iran, but he is thought to have been in NWFP, specifically in Waziristan, since 2001.

The interior ministry statement also cited allegations that Saipov was in contact with Hizb-ut-Tahrir, another Islamic group outlawed in Kyrgyzstan, as well as with Muhammed Salih, the leader of the Uzbek opposition party Erk, who lives in emigration in Europe. Erk leaflets and publications were found in Saipov's office, the statement said.

The statement did not offer a possible motive for either Islamists or the opposition to carry out the murder, but said police had identified suspects who were now on the wanted list.

Finally, the interior ministry highlighted the fact that the Siyosat newspaper had received grant funding from the United States National Endowment for Democracy. This does not in fact mark Saipov's paper out - many non-government organisations, NGOs, in Kyrgyzstan are donor-funded.

It is unclear why these lines of enquiry are being pursued, but they sound uncomfortably close to the kind of black propaganda the Uzbek state media were putting out about Saipov before his death.

The state-controlled media in Uzbekistan have remained largely silent on Saipov's death. On November 11, however, the smear campaign resumed when Press-uz.info news agency carried a statement signed "in the name of Andijan journalists" by Hamidjon Numanov and Nazirjon Saidov, identified as the head and a member, respectively, of the provincial branch of the Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan. Saipov "fulfilled the orders given by his foreign sponsors 100 per cent".

"Saipov may, because he was young, have become a plaything in the hands of western secret services," it said.

The Uzbek leadership was closely aligned with western governments when the "war on terror" began in 2001, providing the United States with the use of an airbase for military flights into Afghanistan. That all changed after Andijan, when international calls for an independent investigation led Tashkent to close the US base and turn its face towards Moscow. It began accusing western spies - working with Islamic militants - of organising the Andijan violence, and pushed western NGOs and media outlets out of the country, suggesting that many were merely proxies for the subversive activities of their governments.

The Andijan journalists' statement contained a number of contradictions, praising Saipov as well as damning him, and talking of "complete freedom of speech" enjoyed by Kyrgyzstan's journalists, a luxury which appeared to be marred only by the inability of their "passive" police force to protect them.

RFE/RL reports that a regional TV station in Uzbekistan showed a programme on October 29 with similar content, alleging that Saipov worked for "evil forces" and was "controlled from abroad".

TOUGH CALL FOR BAKIEV

Having assumed oversight of the murder investigation, President Bakiev finds himself in a difficult position. International and domestic pressure for a proper investigation that bears conclusive results may be hard to square with the realpolitik of living next door to Uzbekistan. The temptation may be to drag out the investigation.

"It's unlikely that the Kyrgyz authorities will be able to present Uzbekistan openly with any allegations," said Malikov.

"The authorities are currently in a position where they have to do their best not to damage Kyrgyzstan's positive international reputation, and simultaneously to get out of this situation with the minimum loss," he said.

Tursunbek Akun, who chairs the Kyrgyz presidential Commission for Human Rights is sure the investigation will be thorough. "There are a number of international memorandums on how to conduct this kind of investigation, and I think it is 60 or 70 per cent likely that it will be done in an objective manner," he said.

If, however, the authorities fail to ensure a fair and transparent investigation, the damage - at home as well as abroad - could involve more than a loss of face. "It will undermine the regime's authority, and [show that] it cannot protect its own citizens from abuse - in other words that the law is not working. That would then suggest that the lawful state exists only in formal terms," said Malikov.

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