

Rent-a-Mob Protests in Central Asia

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In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, police and politicians recruit women as professional campaigners or just as troublemakers.

When angry citizens take to the streets in Kyrgyzstan, not all of them are there out of conviction – some may be “activists for hire”, part of a band of people prepared to express public outrage in return for some kind of remuneration.

More often than not, they are women recruited as a cheap way of filling out crowd numbers, and perhaps reducing the likelihood that the police will storm in, batons flailing, as they would do if demonstrators were predominantly male.

In neighbouring Uzbekistan, meanwhile, major public protests are non-existent, and the state uses rent-a-mob tactics for a more ominous purpose. In order to discredit and assault dissidents, it hires women to set on them in the role of outraged citizens unconnected with the state. According to sources IWPR talked to in the country, it is standard practice to coerce civilians into committing acts of intimidation and violence.

IWPR interviews with hired “activists”, police and commentators in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan reveal that hiring female labour is an effective way of creating a stir, at little cost and at arm’s length. Despite considerable differences in the way such women are deployed in the two states, they are typically from marginalised groups and in need of an income.

PROFESSIONAL PROTESTORS

In Kyrgyzstan, political groups began actively recruiting women as protest participants some years ago, in the belief their presence on the streets could help defuse confrontations with the security forces.

Women played a key role in protests in the southern town of Aksy in 2002, turning out in the altruistic hope that this would offer some protection to their male relatives and neighbours who were taking part. In the event, this did not happen, and police killed six of the protesters.

Many more protests ensued, often against President Askar Akaev until he was ousted in 2005, and then against his successor Kurmanbek Bakiev, forced out in 2010.

These days, the motives of protest participants of either sex are often less clear. According to Pavel Dyatlenko of the think tank Polis Asia, rent-a-mob schemes have become widespread.

The phenomenon of hiring female protesters is so common that they have acquired the jocular collective nickname OBON – “special-assignment female units” – by analogy with the OMON riot police.

Selecting women for the role may be a calculated move to play on the perception that since “their place is in the home” in this male-dominated society, they must be resorting to protest out of genuine desperation.

In contrast to Uzbekistan, women are less likely to be employed as provocateurs in Kyrgyzstan than as general campaigners for some kind of political cause. And because the political climate is less rigidly authoritarian than in Uzbekistan, the cause may be either pro- or anti-government, depending on who is paying.

The OBON phenomenon has gained such notoriety that politician Ravshan Sabirov raised it in the Kyrgyz parliament in November, calling for such mercenary action to be punishable by law.

According to the Knews.kg news site, Justice Minister Abylay Muhamedjanov said in response that it would be hard to include a ban on something called “OBON” in the bill on freedom of assembly then before parliament, and suggested the wording should be “destructive forces”.

In the capital Bishkek, protest participants are often drawn from the shanty towns created by incomers from the countryside who are desperate for work and easily manipulated.

The principal incentive is either straight cash or an in-kind reward such as the offer of a good job later on.

The private TV station Channel 5 in Kyrgyzstan last year reported that the informal pay scale for this kind of activity ranged from 11 to 22 dollars a day for taking part in a demonstration; 44 dollars a day for

recruiting and managing ten demonstrators, rising to 500 dollars a day for doing the same with a crowd of 1,000; 22 to 33 dollars for a day's heckling and 66 dollars for more serious troublemaking. The fee for hunger strikers was negotiable. Experts say these approximate rates still apply.

Despite this, many of the women interviewed for this report played down the monetary aspect, suggesting that they were motivated by support for a politician from their clan or region.

At the same time, they were clear that they expected favours or payment in return. And once they got started, just having a steady source of income often obscured any higher motive.

Salkynay, a 40-year-old divorced mother of two from the northern town of Karabalta, told IWPR how she got involved with a political party campaigning for the October 2010 parliamentary election.

A neighbour offered her work distributing leaflets and recruiting new members from her network of friends, and she was then given her own assignment – to attend a public meeting held by a rival candidate and attempt to derail his performance by heckling him.

“I got 500 soms [around 11 US dollars] for bombarding him with difficult questions,” she said, admitting that on this first outing, she had to read from a script while other hecklers had their questions off pat.

Salkynay acknowledges that money was uppermost in her mind, but says she was also happy to be supporting her local member of parliament, who had built a playground and helped pensioners. She would have campaigned for any of the parties, though perhaps not with the same degree of enthusiasm, she said.

The election campaign earned Salkynay just over 200 dollars in the space of a month – more than the average wage, and twice what she used to earn in casual jobs as a market trader or restaurant dishwasher.

Salkynay said the political party agents who hired people like her knew what they were doing, and sized each new recruit up to calculate just how little they needed to pay them.

“They know who these people are and how they live,” she said. “Depending on their financial situation, they can offer them 500 soms, and top that up if necessary.”

Given the army of unemployed, she added, there was no shortage of people willing to spend a couple of hours standing in some square as part of a demonstration, for which they would earn as much as for a full day's work.

WORKING FOR THE HIGHEST BIDDER

Those who join protest movements for purely mercenary aims attract a lot of criticism.

A local government official in southern Kyrgyzstan told IWPR about one woman who he said had worked for opposing political sides, all for money.

“Against Bakiev, for Bakiev, in support of the opposition, against the opposition,” he said.

IWPR spoke to the former activist herself, who said she was just “a woman who is always fighting for justice” and had turned against Bakiev only when he proved to be no better than his predecessor Akaev, against whom she also protested until he was ousted in 2005.

She insisted she never got any remuneration, saying, “I never took part in a rally for money, or for anything else.”

Salima, 60, from outside the capital Bishkek, used to be a regular participant in demonstrations in support of a political figure who fell out with the government about ten years ago. Although she was paid for mobilising and participating in protests at the time, she said she was a committed supporter of the politician, since she was from the same region as him.

In the end, she gave it up later, because the politician failed to deliver when she approached him and asked him to secure a good job for her daughter.

“Now I see women my age taking part in rallies, and I want to tell them that no politician is worth all that time and effort,” she said.

BULLIES FOR THE REGIME

Many rights activists believed that the OBON idea in Kyrgyzstan was borrowed from Uzbekistan, and then modified to suit the different circumstances there.

In Uzbekistan, where the police state has a monopoly on political activity, rent-a-crowd tactics are used for more sinister aims.

For at least a decade, the uniformed police and the National Security Service, SNB, have been coercing women to harass and assault dissidents and disrupt demonstrations. They commonly use prisoners released on probation, others with a criminal record, sex workers, or market traders – all groups that live in fear of the police, and can therefore be pressured into carrying out their will.

For the security services, the advantage of using proxies is that they can dissociate themselves from the use of physical violence.

Yelena Urlaeva, head of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, has been on the receiving end of such attacks more than once. Six years ago, she travelled to the western city of Bukhara to attend the trial of dissident poet Yusuf Juma.

“As soon as I got off the train, a group of women attacked me with steel bars and sticks, shouting at me and demanding that I leave,” she recalled.

In April 2011, Urlaeva’s house was broken into by another group of women, after she and her colleagues were interviewed in the Russian media.

An SNB officer confirmed that it was official policy to recruit and deploy groups of women.

“It isn’t a new practice – it was employed in the Soviet era, and it was pretty effective,” he told IWR on condition of anonymity. “At the beginning of the 2000s, it was decided to revive it, as it was becoming difficult to use force to crush protests and rallies held by rights activists and other disgruntled people. With western journalists always present in the country, brutal treatment of protesters would be reported immediately. When the ‘women’s battalions’ were used, there could be no reproaches against the police or the authorities – it was as if people, women were unhappy with the protesters and were taking a stand.”

According to the SNB officer, the police will put together a “women’s battalion” and set its civilian members on an individual human rights defender, or on a group of activists.

“There are about 30 women in such groups. Each of them is put together to perform a particular task. If someone has to be beaten up, it will be well-built young women aged 20-25,” he said, adding that older women would be called on if threats and intimidation were all that was required.

Muhabat, a sex worker in the capital Tashkent, was forced to take part in organised attacks after police put pressure on her.

She says she and other prostitutes had been paying off local police, but were then visited by a senior officer who told them they were now on a list of police agents tasked with combating “enemies of the people” whenever required to do so.

Their first job was to break up a protest outside the prosecutor’s office in Tashkent’s Chorsu district, where several dozen residents were trying to get the demolition of their homes halted.

“We were instructed to mostly attack the men, to bite them and provoke them into hitting back so that they could be arrested for beating up women. We were told to hurl insults at them and tear at their clothing. The instructions were to hit men in the face or kick them in the groin and pull women by the hair where possible,” she said.

Nargiz, a market trader in Tashkent, was swept up with a group accused of failing to issue receipts, during a police raid to stop tax evasion. They were given a simple choice – cooperate with the police or face punishment, and Nargiz agreed to the former.

“Two hours before being sent out to disperse a protest, we were issued our instructions and given sticks to beat up the rights activists. For each action, we got paid 50,000 soms [25 US dollars], plus assurances that we could continue trading at the Kuyluk market unhindered,” she said. “Sometimes we didn’t get paid anything, and instead we were threatened with trouble.”

Nargiz said she used to be called up two or three times a month, but nowadays it was less frequent. This ties in with the accounts of both Urlaeva and the SNB officer, who said the use of these special “female units” had tailed off in recent years.

“It used to be widespread. Such units still exist, but they aren’t sent into action as often as before,” the security officer said.

The reasons for this have more to do with the fact that there are so few active dissidents and human rights activists left in Uzbekistan, rather than a shift to more liberal attitudes. After the 2005 shooting of hundreds of civilians in Andijan, rights defenders and independent journalists were arrested or fled the country.

In parallel, foreign reporters and human rights monitors were expelled or forced out of Uzbekistan, so the kind of scrutiny the SNB officer spoke about was less of a problem for the security services.

In Kazakhstan, using women as an arm's-length way of meting out state-sanctioned violence is rarer. One case occurred in June 2011 in the western town of Janaozen, when striking oil workers and their wives were detained for several hours. The incident began when a woman approached their demonstration and began insulting and assaulting them.

As is common practice in neighbouring Uzbekistan, the Kazak police waded in and detained the victims of the attack, not the perpetrator. Police later told journalists that the woman had filed a complaint against the demonstrators.

In Kyrgyzstan, the consensus view is that OBON-type activities will continue as long as there are people willing to do anything for money – in other words, as long as the economy remains in severe depression.

Dinara Oshurakhunova, head of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, says she does not blame the women who allow themselves to be recruited. But she is scathing about those with the money and will to “exploit the knowledge that these people are prepared to come out for a rally because they need to feed their families”.

The names of some interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

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