

## **Security Crackdown for Uzbek Elections**

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Opposition activists claim authorities want to prevent a Ukraine-style protest at upcoming ballot. Uzbekistan is in the grip of an unprecedented security crackdown in the run-up to the December 26 parliamentary elections.

The streets of the capital Tashkent and the republic's other towns and cities are bristling with armed police amid apparent government fears of a repetition of the mass protests that followed the recent presidential election in the Ukraine.

A senior official in the capital's interior ministry department said, "One of police's tasks is to prevent the slightest disturbance to the peace on election-day, as was the case in Ukraine."

The source confirmed that from December 20, Tashkent's police officers were placed on 24-hour guard at polling stations and not allowed to return to their homes.

Law-enforcement bodies in other regions are taking similar measures to protect voting booths ahead of the election.

Security at election time is normally very tight because of official concern over threat posed by Islamic extremists.

The elections to the two-chamber parliament are taking place at the end of a year in which 50 people were killed in a series of bomb attacks in city, which were later blamed on Muslim fundamentalists.

But human rights activists believe that the scale of the security crackdown suggests the authorities are determined to prevent pro-democracy demonstrators from voicing their anger after the Erk and Birlik opposition parties were prevented from taking part in the ballot.

Atanazar Arifov, a senior Erk official, told IWPR that the exclusion of opposition parties rendered the election "meaningless and criminal".

"We are calling for a boycott of the elections, so that voters can avoid participating in a crime," said Arifov.

Independent political analyst Bakhodiy Musaev said that such a call could not fail to alarm the Uzbek authorities, who are blamed by the public for the republic's extreme poverty and high unemployment.

"No one believes the authorities," said Musaev. "The people of Uzbekistan are in a state of passive protest."

As well as an increased police presence, some people claim that there has been a further crackdown on the rights and movement of opposition activists and even Uzbek citizens who are registered as living in places other than Tashkent.

The Birlik party claims that many of its members were summoned to police stations across the capital, where they were asked to fill out forms and hand over personal information about themselves and their family members. These measures are generally seen as a form of intimidation, aimed to deter people from engaging in any form of protest.

In the city of Chirchik on December 18, Bokhodyr Kambarov, leader of the Erk party's youth organisation Tanlov, was detained on suspicion of drug possession.

When Kambarov was released on December 22, he refused to talk to journalists or to make any comment about his arrest.

Erk secretary Arifov, who believes that Kambarov was tortured, told IWPR that the authorities were trying to break the will of the opposition before the elections.

The authorities have also been closely monitoring passengers on incoming flights. Special desks at the city's airport were set up a fortnight ago, with police taking down passport details of all visitors.

"We have to know who is flying into Tashkent and why - we must provide security for the elections," a policeman told one angry passenger who protested against what he saw as an intrusion.

Meanwhile, the capital's police have also begun to purge Tashkent of people visiting from Uzbekistan's regions. Those not officially registered in city may be arrested, and then forced to return to their home towns.

Akmal, a young man from the southern Surkhandarye region, told IWPR that he came to Tashkent to work as a labourer, but has been unable to do so since December 16, when police began to stop people in the street and demand to see proof that they were registered in the capital.

"A group of police surrounded the construction site where I was working and began pushing all the workers into buses. The police ignored the protests of the owner of the building, and we were all taken to a holding centre in Kuilyuk," he said.

Akmal told IWPR that the group was then driven out of the city in buses escorted by the police, "They let us go in Samarkand and all I could do then was make my own way back to Tashkent."

Another labourer, Sanjar, says that the most frightening thing for him at the moment is to be noticed by the police.

"I am scared that they may send me home because of the elections, and then I won't be able to return to Tashkent, I can't afford the journey," he said.

Nigora Khidoyatova, the head of unregistered opposition party Ozod Dekhkonlar, described this practise as a gross violation of human rights.

"The authorities are violating their citizens' right to free movement, which is guaranteed by the Uzbekistan constitution," Khidoyatova told IWPR.

But the interior ministry denies there is anything wrong with deporting citizens from the capital if they do not have official permission to live and work there, and insists that the extra security measures are necessary.

"Our task is to provide security for the parliamentary elections, and the government which is elected will then think about observing the laws and rights of its citizens," said a spokesperson.

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