

## **Tajik Opposition Figure Gets 26 Years**

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Convicted of corruption and sexual offences, Zayd Saidov was arrested shortly after setting up an opposition party.

The long jail sentence given to a former industry minister who set up his own political party in Tajikistan is being seen as a way of eliminating a potentially powerful opponent of the current administration, analysts say.

On December 25, Tajikistan's Tajik Supreme Court sentenced Zayd Saidov to 26 years in prison after convicting him of sexual relations with a minor, polygamy, fraud and corruption – four of the eight charges brought against him. Saidov insisted he was innocent of all charges.

He will serve his sentence in a high-security prison and his assets will be confiscated.

Saidov, 55, was arrested in May 2013, a month after he set up the New Tajikistan party. This political group set out to represent the interests of the business community, but was clearly perceived as a threat to President Imomali Rahmon and his circle. Saidov did not take steps to compete in the November presidential election – duly won by Rahmon – but his party indicated that it would field candidates in the 2015 parliamentary polls. (See **Emerging Force in Tajik Politics Arrested**.)

According to political analyst Parviz Mullojanov, the case against Saidov was overtly political from the outset. The 26-year prison term, he added, was equivalent to a death sentence and was intended as a clear message.

"This is the authorities' way of showing that anyone who tries to do the same will face the same fate. The government is sending out a warning," Mullojanov said.

He believes the administration responded in a particularly harsh way to Saidov's effort to build a separate power-base because he was seen as a defector from the ruling elite.

Saidov was on the opposition side during the 1992-97 civil war, but was given a government post in the power-sharing arrangement that formed part of the peace deal. By the time he left the cabinet in 2006, he had risen to the post of industry minister. Moving into business, he continued to cultivate good relations with the ruling elite and set up a successful commercial portfolio with interests including construction and real estate.

"He was the last remaining member of the [civil war opposition] in the government under the 30 per cent quota," Mullojanov said. "But when he sought to set up a political party, and did so on the eve of a presidential election, it angered them."

The head of the opposition Islamic Rebirth Party, Muhiddin Kabiri, agreed that Saidov was viewed as an unusually major threat.

"What annoyed the government was that Saidov didn't back down from his plan to establish a party even after numerous warnings and heavy pressure," Kabiri said.

Saidov's lawyers told IWPR that the investigation and subsequent trial were fraught with procedural irregularities, and they themselves were pressured to back off.

Fahriddin Zokirov, one of the three-member defence team, said the judge only issued a copy of the verdict five days later, instead of when judgement was passed in court. Furthermore, Saidov's lawyers were asked to sign a statement prohibiting them from discussing the verdict publicly, and were told not to ask for more details about the judge's findings.

Zokirov says sexual offences were added to the charge-sheet because prosecutors were struggling to build a case around alleged economic crimes. The charges of sexual offences also allowed the court to conduct the case behind closed doors.

The defence also had a paternity test carried out independently which found that Saidov was not, as investigators alleged, the father of a child which formed part of the sexual offences case. Their submission on this was, however, ignored.

"These accusations were needed to gain time and look for other pretexts to keep him under arrest," said

Oinihol Bobonazarova, a leading rights activist who was failed in her attempt to run in the 2013 presidential election.

After Saidov's arrest, party colleagues, human rights defenders and journalists set up a campaign group called the Coalition for Democracy to fight for his release.

On the day he was sentenced, some 200 people gathered in front of the building of the National Security Service's detention centre, where the court proceedings were taking place. Police cordoned off the building and tried to disperse the crowd. Several people were briefly detained and fined.

Police also tried to stop journalists from filming the protest. Abdurrahim Shukurov, a correspondent for the Ozodagon news agency, was arrested and released the next day after a public outcry.

In a separate move, a group of well-known intellectuals and other public figures published an open letter to President Rahmon asking him to pardon Saidov.

Saifullo Safarov, head of the Centre for Strategic Studies – which had close ties to the president's office – responded to the open letter by saying Rahmon was in no way involved in the Saidov case.

While Safarov said presidential pardons could be issued under certain circumstances, it seems unlikely this will extend to Saidov.

Mullojanov recalled a similar case in which a regime insider was locked up for years without the possibility of release. Mahmadrusi Iskandarov was –like Saidov – a former opposition member who came into the government fold. He was head of the state-run TajikGaz company until 2003, when he fell out of favour for criticising planned amendments to the constitution to enable Rahmon to stay on as president. In 2005, he was tried on charges including terrorism and theft of state property, and sentenced to 23 years' imprisonment.

“Having locked up Zayd Saidov for 26 years, the authorities have secured their own position for many years,” Bobonazarova said.

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