

Tajik Opposition Leader Arrested

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Questions are asked about how a high-profile figure turned up in detention in Tajikistan when he was last seen as a free man in Russia.

The shock announcement that opposition leader Mahmadrusi Iskandarov is being held in a Tajikistan jail after he was last seen in Russia has raised questions about whether the authorities in both countries are bending the law to head off any more Kyrgyz-style revolutions.

Meanwhile, another leading political figure whom Moscow extradited to Tajikistan earlier this year received a long jail term this week.

Iskandarov, the head of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, is currently being held in the capital Dushanbe, but the circumstances in which he was arrested remain unclear.

News of Iskandarov's arrest came at an April 26 press conference given by Tajik prosecutor general Bobojon Bobokhonov. "He was detained in Dushanbe and placed in the detention centre of the security ministry," said Bobokhonov.

The prosecutor refused to elaborate on this statement, but after the press conference was over, he added that the arrest took place on April 22.

Iskandarov was last sighted in Moscow, where he was released from a Russian jail on April 3 after nearly than four months in custody awaiting the outcome of an extradition request from the Tajik authorities.

Russia's chief prosecutor ruled that Iskandarov must be freed because there was insufficient evidence to send him back to Tajikistan,

In an unusual public display of anger at the country which is Tajikistan's major ally, Bobokhonov said on April 11 that Russia must "correct its error" and "re-arrest this terrorist".

Tajik prosecutors have accused Iskandarov of a range of offences including attempted murder, terrorism and embezzlement. Many in the opposition, however, believe the allegations are politically motivated and represent a step to eliminate a powerful opposition figure.

Iskandarov's colleagues in the Democratic Party and his Moscow lawyer Anna Stavitskaya are certain he was detained in Russia, not Tajikistan, and that he disappeared on April 15, a full week before Bobokhonov says he was arrested.

"Iskandarov was abducted by the Tajik secret services with the knowledge of the Russian authorities, and sent to Dushanbe via the Chkalovsk military airport in the Moscow region," said a Democratic Party member who wished to remain anonymous.

Shokir Hakimov, who heads another opposition party, the Social Democrats, is certain Iskandarov was

snatched while still outside Tajikistan. "He could not have been arrested in Dushanbe, as he knew that it was not safe for him in Tajikistan," he said.

Hakimov too believes a Tajik police unit grabbed Iskandarov in Moscow in defiance of international law and without observing proper procedures.

"The Russian structures did not properly ensure Iskandarov's safety, given his status and his appeal to the political leadership of Russia to give him political asylum," he said.

Given that the Russian prosecutor had just said there was no legal reason why Iskandarov should be detained further or sent back to face trial in Tajikistan, it is hard to explain why Moscow would allow him to be snatched.

One event that analysts believe may have played a role is a meeting between Russian president Vladimir Putin and his Tajik counterpart Imomali Rahmonov in the Black Sea resort of Sochi in early April. The Tajik president said afterwards that they discussed how to prevent a repeat of "crises" such as the Kyrgyz revolution.

Political analyst Tursun Kabirov believes Rahmonov may have secured Moscow's blessing to take a harder line with opponents.

"It is no secret that these 'colour revolutions' in the [former Soviet] republics are causing Russia to lose their influence on them," said Kabirov. "So the Kremlin is doing its utmost to support regimes that could be next in line for revolution, and is even offering guidelines on how to prevent 'rose' and 'orange' scenarios [a reference to the Georgian "rose revolution" and the orange-themed protests in Ukraine]."

This week the Tajikistan authorities also dealt with another political opponent, albeit one of a different stripe from Iskandarov.

Yakub Salimov was once a close ally of Rahmonov, serving as a commander in the Popular Front militia which brought the president to power and went on to fight against the opposition guerrilla force of which Iskandarov was part. Salimov later became interior minister but fell from grace in 1997 after taking part in a mutiny.

Arrested in Moscow in 2003, Salimov was extradited to Tajikistan in February 2004 and went on trial in September on a long list of charges including treason and abuse of power.

On April 25 this year, the Tajik supreme court sentenced Salimov to 15 years in a high security prison.

The judicial authorities are about to try another former longstanding Rahmonov ally. Ghafur Mirzoev is accused of planning a revolt after the presidential guard he led was disbanded in January 2004. What is strange about the case is that shortly after this alleged crime, Mirzoev was appointed head of Tajikistan's drug's control agency - an important function.

Arrested last August, he and 22 alleged accomplices will go to court in two or three months. "Mirzoev will be charged with trying to bring about a coup," said the prosecutor general.

All these cases pre-date the Kyrgyz revolution, but it does look as though the authorities are in more haste to deal with unfinished business.

“It is not only [ex-members of] the security agencies who have faced repression, but also representatives of political parties in the constructive opposition,” said the head of a non-government organisation, who asked not to be named.

A number of opposition party members have been detained on various charges, and Bobokhonov now has another target in his sights.

Habibullo Nasrulloev is accused, like Salimov, of taking part in a mutiny, and the Tajiks expect Russia to extradite him shortly. A Moscow court turned down an asylum application on April 30.

“He has gone through all the channels, and I hope he will be handed over to us in the next few days,” said Bobokhonov.

The prosecutor general was recently re-confirmed in his post by President Rahmonov.

Rustam Nazarov is the pseudonym of a journalist in Tajikistan.

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