

Uzbek Amnesty Designed to Please West

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

While rights groups welcome the amnesty offered to several activists, they do not believe it marks a real change in policy.

Uzbek human rights groups have welcomed the amnesty given to several high-profile activists, while warning that many more remain incarcerated.

Saidjahon Zainabiddinov, Umida Niazova, Karim Bazarbaev and Ikhtior Hamroev were freed between February 2 and 4, under a general prison amnesty announced at the end of November.

There were strong suspicions, voiced by the watchdog group Human Rights Watch, that the releases were timed to coincide with a February 5 between officials from Uzbekistan and the European Union, with which Tashkent is gradually trying to win favour.

Zainabiddinov, the longest-serving of those released, is a leading human rights activist who was sentenced to seven years in jail in January 2006.

His conviction for “slander” and “distributing information with the aim of fomenting panic” related to his eyewitness accounts of what happened on May 13, 2005 in his home city of Andijan.

After government troops opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators, the authorities moved in quickly to eliminate the traces and quash any account that differed from their story, which was that less than 200 people died, and many of these were Islamic militants whom the government accused of planning a revolt. Human rights groups claim the real number of dead is closer to 800 and the protest was about injustice, not Islamic revolution.

As the government arrested reporters and other witnesses, Zainabiddinov spoke out to foreign media. He had not only witnessed the shooting, but also the corpses being taken away in trucks the following day. He appeared on the Moscow-based NTV channel holding up massive cartridge casings from large-calibre shells gathered from the square where most of the killings took place – hard evidence that armoured vehicles had turned their guns on civilians.

Unlike other eyewitnesses and alleged participants, Zainabiddinov did not go on trial until early in 2006. His family did not see him for several months beforehand, and it was several days before anyone knew the trial had started. It was clear the government regarded his case as particularly embarrassing and wanted it shielded from publicity.

A second beneficiary of the latest amnesty is the well-known human rights activist and journalist Umida Niazova. She was given a seven-year jail sentence last May, after being convicted of illegally crossing the Uzbek border and of smuggling and distributing dangerous material.

Once again, this apparently illicit material related to Andijan, in the shape of a published human rights report on the tragedy.

Following an international outcry, Niazova's sentence was changed to a suspended one a week later, and she was conditionally released. The amnesty lifts the suspended sentence.

The Uzbek authorities have not been forthcoming on these releases as they do not admit to having political prisoners, and there has been some uncertainty about which other activists have been freed. However, IWPR understands that they include Ikhtior Hamroev, sentenced to three years for "hooliganism" in September 2006, and Karim Bazarbaev, a member of the Ezgulik human rights group who was three months into a six-year sentence for slander, a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

Hamroev's case is revealing – human rights groups believed he was jailed to punish his father Bakhtior for his work with the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan.

The November 30 amnesty marked the 15th anniversary of the constitution of independent Uzbekistan, and covered about 3,500 people convicted of various criminal offences.

Such amnesties occur fairly frequently, and the categories eligible for release are carefully worded in order to exclude anyone viewed as politically undesirable. The terms of this amnesty were no different.

The release of several dissidents, therefore, was as unexpected as it was welcome.

Nadezhda Ataeva, who chairs the France-based Human Rights in Central Asia association, admits that the news came as a surprise to her, as the amnesty wording did not appear to apply to them.

"Zainabiddinov did not expect an amnesty and nor did Umida Niazova, because their experience of previous attempts to obtain amnesty had been far from encouraging," she said.

Ataeva's group believes at least 50 activists remain behind bars as a result of the wave of arrests that followed the Andijan violence.

Legal experts and rights activists are wondering, cautiously, whether this or future amnesties might be extended to other prisoners serving sentences for political offences.

Take, for example, Azam Farmonov and Alisher Qoramatov, both members of the Human Rights Society. The ten-year sentences they got in June 2006 for extortion and illegal publishing can be explained by their previous activities – investigating complaints by farmers in the Syrdarya region that their rights were being violated by corrupt officials.

However, Vasila Inoyatova, head of the Ezgulik rights group, doubts that the authorities intend to free most of the human rights activists now in detention.

All that has happened is that few prison cells have been opened as a gesture to the EU, she said, adding, "It was a present to the European Union in return for having recognised the legitimacy of [President Islam] Karimov's re-election."

“If the Uzbek authorities really wanted to amnesty representatives of civil society, they could have done it earlier,” she said.

The amnesty followed a high-profile visit to Tashkent of the EU’s special representative for Central Asia, Pierre Morel, who conveyed congratulations to Karimov for his triumph in the December presidential election.

Most independent observers described the poll as a farce. In defiance of his own constitution’s ban on serving a third term, Karimov was re-elected on December 24, after apparently winning 88 per cent of the vote.

The electoral process was sharply criticised abroad, while the OSCE refused to conduct full monitoring of the poll, citing “the explicitly limited nature of the election race”.

Tashkent is keen to mend fences with the EU in the run-up to an April 2008 review on the remnants of EU sanctions imposed after Andijan.

Brussels imposed an arms embargo and a visa ban on top Uzbek officials in November 2005 after Tashkent refused to allow an independent international probe into the Andijan bloodshed.

These latest releases may have raised hopes that other critics of the regime might soon follow them out of jail, but an activist from the Jizzakh region told IWPR such hopes might be deceptive.

“The government is simply changing its tactics,” the activist said. “Islam Karimov has not changed his attitude towards his opponents, and he shows them no mercy.”

He added that the releases reflected a “selective approach” on the part of the authorities, rather than offering clues about their future plans.

Other observers, however, are still holding out hope that as Tashkent seeks a thaw in relations with the West, further high-profile releases will follow.

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