

## **Uzbek Policies Under Attack**

**Author:** [Alexander Zakharov](#)

Kazak and Tajik authorities face first protests against Uzbek neighbour's tough line on Islamists.

The authorities in Kazakstan and Tajikistan have been put in a difficult position by a series of public protests against the regime in neighbouring Uzbekistan, analysts say. Police quickly broke up the demonstrations but so far have imposed only light sentences on those involved.

But observers fear there is more to come as anger over the Uzbek government's policies grows in neighbouring countries.

Police are still investigating a series of demonstrations held on November 21 in several towns in Kazakstan and Tajikistan, in which protesters condemned the Uzbek government's harassment and detention of Muslims suspected of belonging to the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir group. Dozens – in some places hundreds – of people took part.

The protests were clearly coordinated, and were the first public protests against Uzbek government policy to be held in Uzbekistan's neighbours.

In Kazakstan's former capital Almaty, after Friday prayers in the city's main mosque, around 60 people set off for the Uzbek embassy carrying posters and banners with slogans criticising the country's leaders. According to Kazak police spokesmen, the protesters said that Uzbek president Islam Karimov had established an "anti-Muslim regime" which oppresses devout Muslims.

Within minutes, police called on the protesters to disperse, and when this did not happen they moved in and made six arrests. Almaty deputy police chief Sabit Utegenov told IWPR that all were ethnic Kazaks and included one woman. They were later sentenced to between two and ten days in jail for the offence of holding a public gathering without official permission.

In the southern city of Chimkent close to the border with Uzbekistan, between 500 and 1,000 demonstrators gathered in a central square. Some held up photographs of maimed corpses, saying that they the bodies of people killed by Uzbek security forces. "This is how Karimov's stooges treat our fellow Muslims," said one protester.

Local police rapidly moved in to break up the demonstration, and journalists saw several protesters being forced into police cars.

Similar rallies were staged in other southern towns – Jetysai, Arys and Kentau – as well as in Pavlodar in the north of Kazakstan.

In Tajikistan, protest meetings were held in the capital Dushanbe and the northern city of Khujand, which lies close to Uzbekistan. The demonstrators were the mothers of people now in jail in Tajikistan on charges of Hizb-ut-Tahrir membership, but as well as protesting about this they spoke out against the treatment of Tajik citizens currently held in Uzbekistan on the same charges.

In Dushanbe, Tajik police were on the scene in less than 15 minutes, loading the demonstrators into buses

and taking them to a police station. But they said later that no charges or other punishment would be brought against the women.

On December 1 – ten days after the protests – police made four arrests of people they suspect of organising the demonstrations in Khujand and Dushanbe, saying they were ethnic Uzbeks from northern Tajikistan who were members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Officials in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have clearly been put in an awkward position by these protests. Analysts say the authorities in the two countries had little option but to intervene quickly, because allowing the protests to continue could have damaged their already uneasy relationship with Tashkent by leaving them open to accusations that they were hosting Islamic groups openly hostile to the Uzbek government.

Kazakhstan, in particular, has in the past displayed greater tolerance to Islamic activism than its Central Asian neighbours, in part because it has not perceived such a great threat from these groups.

Almaty deputy police chief Utegenov reflected this attitude, telling IWPR that he thought the protesters – even the six arrested by his men – were just devout Muslims whose intentions were peaceable. “We don’t forbid them to advocate their ideas on how to pray and so on,” he said. “But they should do this in the mosques, and not hold unsanctioned protests and marches outside – that’s illegal.”

Utegenov would not be drawn on the reasons behind the protest, saying, “I don’t know what’s going on in Uzbekistan – I’m not even interested.”

What is going on in Uzbekistan is that several thousand people accused of Islamic activism – in most cases membership of Hizb-ut-Tahrir – are incarcerated in prisons, often facing long sentences.

Islamic activists have been arrested in Uzbekistan since the early Nineties, but the authorities began focusing on Hizb-ut-Tahrir only in 1999, following a series of explosions in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent which were blamed on religious extremists.

Local and international human rights groups report that convictions are often based on flimsy evidence, and that torture is used routinely to extract confessions. A number of deaths of Hizb-ut-Tahrir supporters while in custody are alleged to be the result of mistreatment.

The Uzbek government has in the past insisted that the people in jail present a threat because they plan to overthrow the state. It has denied allegations that its security forces use torture systematically.

The authorities in Tajikistan have also jailed suspected activists from the group, although the numbers are much smaller.

Observers say the unrelenting pressure exerted by the Uzbek government is expected to prove counterproductive. As a result, protesters are increasingly likely to vent their anger in neighbouring countries. And this will only add to discontent about Uzbekistan’s behaviour towards these countries.

“Karimov’s policies are increasingly leading to radicalisation,” said Yevgeny Zhovtis, director of the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law. “Several thousand people in Uzbekistan are in jail, often on false charges, and torture is used against them. And radicalisation of thought leads to radicalisation of actions.”

According to Andrei Chebotarev, an employee of Transparency International in Kazakstan, “What is happening – and has even happened in Kazakstan – shows that there is serious discontent with Uzbekistan’s policies. In future, the protests by Muslims against Uzbekistan may also be joined by ordinary citizens who are unhappy with the actions of Uzbek border guards, territorial redistribution, or something else.”

Nargis Zokirova is a correspondent for the newspaper Vecherny Dushanbe; Alexander Zakharov is the pseudonym of an independent journalist in Almaty; Daur Dosybaev is the editor of the newspaper Rabat in Shymkent, Kazakstan.

**Location:** [Uzbekistan](#)  
[Tajikistan](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbek-policies-under-attack>