

Uzbekistan: Angry Pensioners Demand Rights

Author: [Kudrat Babajanov](#)

Over-60s stage protest as local government runs out of cash to pay pensions.

Older people are unlikely candidates to hold a public protest anywhere, let alone in tightly-controlled Uzbekistan. But in Khorezm, an arid region in the north of the country where life is hard at the best of times, pensioners have had enough.

Many have been waiting three or even six months for their pensions. The regional government says it has run out of money and just can't pay them. So more than 100 pensioners staged a protest outside the local government headquarters in Urgench, the main town in the region.

Their anger over payment delays is shared by many pensioners and state-sector employees across Uzbekistan, who have held demonstrations and even gone on strike. Such protests are extremely rare in a country where political opposition is all but invisible, and they indicate the desperation of those involved.

One of the Urgench protesters, Norimon Tojiev, says that no one in his family works and they depend on their father's pension, which is only 10,000 sums, about 10 US dollars, a month.

"You can't buy anything with this money, and it isn't even paid on time," Tojiev told IWPR.

Tojiboi Hammetov, who was also at the protest, said the hold-up meant he was unable to buy medicine for his wife, who was seriously ill.

The head of the Urgench local administration, Rahmatullo Zoirkhonov, is frank about the scale of the financial crisis. He has about 100 million sums, or 100,000 dollars, left in his budget, which he plans to use to pay pensions due for May. But that will leave June and July unpaid – and there's nothing he can do about it right now.

Figures from his office show a total shortfall of about 450 million sums in delayed pensions in this district alone – and other public-sector workers such as teachers are also experiencing delays in their wages.

To alleviate the situation, the authorities in Khorezm have offered to hand out food to pensioners and not to charge them for gas and electricity, in lieu of the cash they are due.

The reason why Zoirkhonov has no money is quite simple, he says. Local government's tax revenues have been slashed because of a dramatic slump in trade. Urgench district currently makes 10,000 dollars a month in receipts from trade. Until May 2002, the figure was more than ten times that sum.

As elsewhere in Uzbekistan, domestic trade in Khorezm region went into recession after the government imposed swingeing customs duties on imported goods in May last year. Although it later reduced the rates, they still stand at 70 and 40 per cent duty on imports of industrial goods and foodstuffs respectively. As a result, the price of imported goods has rocketed in the shops, and business has slumped.

Independent analysts say the government took this unpopular step as part of a strategy to gain control of the exchange rate – by depressing the level of imports it reduced the demand for foreign currency needed to buy them.

With this situation unlikely to change, local government is living hand to mouth. Zoirkhonov said the hole in his budget will be filled if Khorezm region sees a good cotton harvest later in the year.

“Have patience,” he told the pensioners. “There will be money in autumn.”

But it’s not certain this year’s cotton crop will do well. Dilshod Abdullaev of the state-owned agricultural processing firm Agroprom told IWPR that most of the plants in Khorezm are suffering from cotton wilt. In addition, the harvest will be almost a month late, as the cotton had to be replanted after an unusually rainy spring.

Pensioners are particularly angered when they see lavish government spending on new buildings, festivals and other events. In May, a large slice of Khorezm region’s budget went on hosting a national-level sports competition for young people.

Some officials think that people should do more to fend for themselves. “The time has passed when everyone could simply demand to be given things,” pensioners were told by Kadambai Ruzmetov, who heads a council of villages in Urgench. “Each person must now adapt to the economic realities, and every family needs a reliable breadwinner so that there is always some money in the family.”

Anyway, said Ruzmetov, Urgench pensioners were not in as bad a position as those in other districts in the region, “The situation is even worse in the Kushkupir and Yangibazar districts, so people need to be patient.”

But as pensioners try in vain to extract their money from local government and the state-owned banks, which handle the payments, their patience is running out.

Others in the same position have begun mounting similar protests. On July 30, the workforce went on strike at the Rezinotekhnika rubber plant in Angren, 100 kilometres south of the capital Tashkent. They had not been paid since the beginning of the year. Factory managers responded by paying some wages – but only for the month of January.

Six days later there, several dozen people gathered outside the local government building in the city of Andijan in the Fergana valley to demand that pensions and public-sector wages be released. This protest followed a similar one in the town of Fergana.

Such actions are still isolated and on a small scale, but they represent a new trend of grassroots protest by a population that can no longer afford to be as patient as the government asks.

Kudrat Babjanov is a correspondent for IWPR in Khorezm region, Uzbekistan.

Location: [Uzbekistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbekistan-angry-pensioners-demand-rights>