

Uzbekistan: IWPR Reporter Beaten Up

Author: [Galima Bukharbaeva](#)

Police say Jamshid Karimov was the victim of a simple mugging, but he's sure he was targeted for his journalism.

Uzbek journalist Jamshid Karimov, who writes for IWPR, is convinced he was target of a brutal assault because of his critical reporting.

The authorities in the city of Jizzakh, where Karimov lives, say the attack was not political, merely a motiveless mugging.

But if this is the case, the timing – two days after he refused to be coopted into an official job and the same day as human rights activists were planning a protest meeting in the city – was unfortunate. A week later, participants in another demonstration were to be attacked, once again by unidentified assailants.

Karimov, 37, a nephew of Uzbek president Islam Karimov, was set upon and beaten by two men on December 21, as he was setting off for his usual early morning walk.

He told IWPR that when he was suddenly hit from behind, he fell to the ground and his assailants began kicking him in the face repeatedly so that he was unable to get up.

“The kicks simply blinded me, I started bleeding and couldn't see anything,” he said. “I couldn't even look at their faces so that I'd remember them.”

After the attack – which lasted about 15 minutes – Karimov was left with a broken nose and facial bruising, and had to have three stitches for a laceration on his forehead.

He says his attackers said they knew who he was, and that his father, Arslan Karimov, who had worked as a judge, had convicted relatives of one of the attackers.

Since Karimov's father died in 1989, the apparent grudge would date back a long time, to Soviet times.

Instead, the reporter points to the way his assailants focused on hitting his face, and says he believes the people behind the attack wanted to ensure that his injuries would take him off the scene temporarily. The damage to his face meant that he was unable to go out on reporting assignments in the run-up to the Uzbek parliamentary election on December 26.

The reporter is in no doubt that the attack was planned and ordered by the Jizzakh authorities, as a punishment for his journalistic and human rights activity which had been a constant source of irritation to them.

He was one of a number of journalists who exposed abuses by the regional administration and gave coverage to public protests.

Karimov says that as well as making threats, the authorities – including senior policemen as well as local government officials – tried to entice him into a less troubling line of work.

On December 18, just two days before the attack, the deadline ran out for him to accept a job offer as press secretary for Jizzakh regional governor Ubaidullah Yamonkulov. He had turned the post down, saying his principles were not up for sale.

However, Jizzakh city mayor Hokimjon Inomjonov ruled out any possibility that the assault was premeditated, “An investigation is under way, and the hooligans will soon be caught. I am certain that there is no political motive here.”

The chief of the city police department in Jizzakh, Olim Kosimov, said the attack was being treated as a criminal offence and investigated, but was not seen as having anything to do with Karimov’s reporting activities, “No, no, it is not connected with journalism. I am certain that Jamshid was the random victim of hooligans.”

According to Kosimov, the victim suffered only minor injuries, “just a scratch on his face”.

But the reporter’s mother, Muslima Karimova, rejects the claim that her son’s disfigured and puffy face and broken nose count as just light scratches.

She says police have shown little interest in the attack, “They even took a long time to turn up when I called them, and were very reluctant to investigate the case. They are clearly interested in hushing it up as soon as possible.”

Talib Yakubov, who heads the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and also hails from Jizzakh, is certain Karimov was singled out for attack by the authorities.

Yakubov’s group has scheduled a series of demonstrations against the governor’s office to protest at the way farmers are treated in Jizzakh region. A number of farmers were allegedly beaten and made to sign away their land during a meeting with officials in August.

On November 29, when Yakubov and his wife were going to join the first protest, they were attacked by a group of young people on the way there. They were beaten and some of the placards they were carrying were taken away.

“My wife fell to the ground from a blow, and then one man jumped on me and we both fell down,” said Yakubov. In the attack, 63-year-old Yakubov had one of his ribs broken.

Subsequent protest meetings saw bystanders shouting insults at the participants in a clear bid to provoke violence, he said.

Jamshid Karimov is highly critical of his uncle, the Uzbek president. Islam Karimov became First Secretary of Soviet Uzbekistan’s Communist Party in 1989, the year his elder brother Arslan died in a car crash.

He is not in contact with these family members, so they enjoy little protection in a country where

connections usually count for a lot.

“This regime does not spare anyone, not even relatives of the president,” said Yakubov.

Police arrested two suspects in connection with the Karimov assault on December 21. The journalist identified them in a police identity parade, saying they worked in a small café in Jizzakh.

Karimov said they had told police they attacked him because they suspected that he wanted to steal earthenware plates from the café. He said he found the explanation absurd, not least because he was several hundred metres away from the premises when he was assaulted, “The men looked very frightened. I am sure they were forced to say that they were protecting their plates.”

Galima Bukharbaeva is IWPR country director in Uzbekistan.

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