

Uzbekistan: Protests Pass Karimov By

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Head of state claims not to have known about a series of human rights demonstrations in the capital.

President Islam Karimov astonished many this week when he claimed to have been unaware of human rights rallies held in the country and which culminated with some protesters being detained in mental hospitals.

Ironically, Karimov gave a pro-democracy parliamentary address on August 29, the day after his forces broke up the last of the demonstrations that have been staged in Tashkent over the last two weeks.

"Uzbekistan must continue to advance along the path of democracy," Karimov told his deputies. "Human rights and freedom of speech must be ensured by all means."

At a subsequent news conference, Karimov claimed he knew nothing of the protests. "I have never heard of any rallies. What do they want?" the president asked when quizzed by IWPR on the police's heavy-handed tactics against the protestors. Karimov appeared to be genuinely taken aback.

Without disputing people's rights to hold such protests, Karimov said they were a "last resort measure" to be taken only after complaints to civil liberties organisations or the parliamentary human rights commissioner - or ombudsman - had failed.

Local activists insist, however, that the Tashkent protests are a direct result of the ombudsman's indifference to people's complaints.

Some analysts believe it is possible that the president is not fully aware of what is going on, even in the capital, because it's thought that some senior government officials who report to him directly try to conceal bad news from him.

"If the president has no idea what is happening in Tashkent, let alone the provinces, it means he is surrounded by an impenetrable bureaucratic wall," warned history professor Faizulla Iskhakov.

"His aides feed him filtered information. They will never let him know about disturbances, social issues or human rights violations."

Indeed a presidential official, who wished to remain anonymous, said Karimov does not like to hear bad news and has forbidden his immediate advisers from informing him of problems affecting ordinary people.

According to the same source, Karimov berated one adviser bearing depressing reports with the words, "Don't bring street talk into the presidential palace". Iskhakov believes that many officials may be concealing problems out of fear of blame, criticism and punishment.

Although Karimov has reiterated Uzbekistan's commitment to democracy, analysts point out that no progress is possible without credible information.

The republic's newspapers and broadcasters, who rarely cover protests and other serious problems, were recently called upon by the president to "think independently" and show courage.

"The Uzbek press must become what we in the government call the 'fourth estate'," he said. "It must stop waiting for instructions from a superior authority and provide objective coverage of social, economic and political issues. It must be critical but fair in its judgement of governmental decisions and actions."

Karimov also called for stronger civil institutions and political parties, urging activists and politicians alike "to overcome their amorphousness and become the groundwork of a working multi-party, democratic parliamentary system in the country".

In an unusual move on August 20, the authorities gave permission for a ten-hour demonstration - the first time such consent had been granted.

But the protests continued for several days, culminating in a rally in front of the justice ministry on the 27th - the eve of Independence Day celebrations. At this point the security forces intervened breaking up the demos and arrested some of the participants.

Two of them Elena Urlaeva and Larisa Vdovina of the Human Rights Association of Uzbekistan, HRAU, were held for 24 hours without charge before being taken to Tashkent mental hospital. The institution, however, was full and unable to accommodate the new arrivals, who were subsequently released.

Urlaeva was consigned to a mental hospital for three months last year after organising a series of protests, and was only released after intense pressure from local and international human rights groups. HRAU secretary general Talib Yakubov likened the government's tactics to those of the Soviet era, where incarceration in mental institutions was a favourite means of stifling dissent.

Bakhtior Khamraev, a member of the Birlik opposition movement and the HRAU, told IWPR that he has no faith in Karimov's recent speeches. "These words were meant for the West," he said.

"Karimov says nice words about democracy and political freedoms but nothing changes. All those who express liberal views are closely monitored - the authorities don't allow peaceful protests and there is no freedom of speech."

Indeed, when Karimov eventually heard about the Tashkent protests, he shrugged them off, showing no interest in those arrested or whether they were guilty of any offence.

While the president waxes lyrical about Uzbekistan's democratic future, the voters look on as non-governmental activists are beaten and locked up in mental institutions. While Karimov calls for a courageous and independent-minded press, the local media continues to ignore the country's problems and the people's complaints.

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