

Uzbeks Jettison Fear of Authorities

Author: [Galima Bukharbaeva](#)

Desperate citizens are taking to the streets to air their grievances, in defiance of the authorities.

Enraged by tumbling living standards and bureaucratic corruption, Uzbeks are taking to the streets to stage pickets and protests, much to the alarm of the country's authoritarian government.

Desperation - and a growing sense that they are entitled to basic civic rights - is emboldening a growing number of people to brave police harassment and air their grievances in public.

Typical of the new wave of protesters is Nigmatullo Nazaraliev, 54, who organised a picket in mid-April outside the city hall in Tashkent to demand renewal of his city registration papers and passport.

Nazaraliev's bureaucratic nightmare began in 1990, after he registered in neighbouring Kazakhstan in order to purchase a dacha there. When Uzbek citizens were ordered to exchange old Soviet passports for new Uzbek ones by 2000, Nazaraliev found that his Kazak papers counted against him.

Although he was born in Tashkent and is a resident there, the authorities refused to give him an Uzbek passport. He claims officials demanded a 500 US dollar bribe. Not having one is a serious business. You can be detained by police and prevented from leaving the country.

Apart from regular police harassment, Nazaraliev's passport headache cost him his job. In 2001, he was fired from the Chkalov Aviation Production Conglomerate, where he had worked for 21 years. "I've got nothing left to lose," he said. "This picket is my final attempt to see that justice is done."

The one-man protest caused a furore on the streets of Tashkent. Police closed the road where he was demonstrating. Patrol cars cruised the area, keeping watch. Security service personnel could even be seen taking a video of both the proceedings and the rights activists who had joined in. They also tore up Nazaraliev's placards. "You're creating a security threat!" one shouted.

But the rumpus succeeded in having an effect. Rykhsytullo Akramov, deputy mayor of Tashkent, eventually came out into the street and pledged to help Nazaraliev to obtain his registration and passport.

Nazaraliev's surprisingly successful picket was evidence of a trend in Uzbek society. After decades of repression, citizens are losing their instinctive fear of the authorities.

The government of President Islam Karimov, which frowns on public demonstrations of any sort, is worried. It does not like admitting that cases of injustice may have occurred. In a society containing so many resentful people, it fears that small protests could set off a chain reaction, sparking mass demonstrations.

Rights activists believe that the steady impoverishment of so many Uzbeks has created a pool of people prepared for drastic action. "When people are reduced to this condition, what choice do they have?" said Talib Yakubov, head of the Uzbek Society for Human Rights, USHR. "Laws aren't being observed and bureaucrats use every opportunity they get to steal from citizens."

Amid few signs that the Uzbek bureaucracy is about to mend its cumbersome and corrupt ways, more and more citizens may well conclude that pickets and hunger strikes offer the fastest route to justice.

Galima Bukharbaeva is IWPR country director in Uzbekistan

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