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Alisher Ilkhamov on July 2022 events in Karakalpakstan

Speech by Alisher Ilkhamov, Central Asia Due Diligence at ADC Memorial Side Event [‘Ethnic Minorities in Central Asia: From Non-Recognition to Stigma and Discrimination’](#) during the OSCE ODIHR Human Dimension Conference:

This report is a preliminary assessment of the recent developments in Karakalpakstan. It needs to be further refined as more information becomes available on what happened there, which will be possible if an investigation is undertaken, free from political pressure. The proposed overview is based solely on available press reports.

Briefly about what happened and the reasons

In early July, the Republic of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous region of Uzbekistan, witnessed mass protests and brutal suppression by security forces arriving from Tashkent.

The main events took place from the 1st to the 3rd of July. Still, tensions began to increase after the publication on June 25 of the draft constitutional amendments that included changes to six articles (70-75), according to which the Republic of Karakalpakstan had, until now, a sovereign status within Uzbekistan and the right to withdraw from the country, if the majority of the republic’s residents voted for it in a referendum. These changes, which eliminated this sovereign status, were not discussed widely in the republic, which caused discontent and protests among its residents.

The trigger that prompted Nukus residents to take to the streets en masse was the [arrest](#) on July 1 of a local informal leader of public opinion, a lawyer, and a blogger Dauletmurat Tajimuratov. Initially, the protest was entirely peaceful. The use by the law enforcement of tear gas, smoke and stun grenades, and rubber bullets began only around midnight of the same day when a large crowd gathered near the building of Jocardy Kenes (parliament of the republic). By this time, the National Guard units from Tashkent had already begun to arrive. The first victims appeared.

But the main casualties among the population occurred on July 2, when the National Guard, which acted much more brutally than the local police, began cracking down on the protests. There were isolated cases of violence on the part of protesters, but this was mainly in

response to the brutal treatment of the protesters and even random passers-by by the security services. According to local witnesses, the latter began using firearms against the protesters.

The protests were completely suppressed by the morning of July 3. But the introduced state of emergency in the republic was cancelled only on July 21.

Victims

According to [official data](#), 21 people were killed, including 4 law enforcement officers; 243 were injured, of which 94 are in critical condition, and 516 were arrested. However, many locals do not believe these statistics and claim that many more were killed.

According to local medical personnel [cited](#) by Gazeta.uz journalist, 77 people were killed in the first two days alone. Most likely, this number has increased if some of those seriously injured eventually die.

According to the opposition figure [Aman Sagidullayev](#), who lives in Norway and has long advocated Karakalpakstan's secession from Uzbekistan, three hundred have been killed and a thousand wounded.

In my opinion, because of the apparent motivation to downplay the number of victims in the first case and to exaggerate these figures in the third, the figure reported by the medical personnel, that is, around 77 killed, seems to be more credible. But this still needs to be verified by an independent and professional investigation.

Main problems identified

Constitutional amendments

The constitutional provision on the right to secede from Uzbekistan is truly unique for an autonomous republic in the post-Soviet space. The country's leadership had obvious fears that one day this constitutional status of a sovereign republic could threaten Uzbekistan's territorial integrity. However, the authorities preparing these amendments did not prepare public opinion in this republic, did not hold discussions among the population, and did not present any arguments for changing the status quo to the public. The publication of the draft amendments took the residents of Karakalpakstan by surprise and shock. Formally, the initiative to change the articles on sovereignty came from the deputies of Jocardy Kenes, but most likely, this "initiative" was imposed from the above, from Tashkent.

It is necessary to pay tribute to the fact that the president has already on July 2 announced the withdrawal of the draft amendments. However, this decision did not immediately reach the residents of Karakalpakstan due to the information blockade around the republic, as access to the Internet in the republic was almost entirely blocked by the evening of July 1. Also, law enforcement did not supplement this concession with a more tolerant treatment of the protesters. Because of this, the effect of the concession made by the president was minimal.

Use of force against protesters

As noted, in addition to special means of crowd dispersal, firearms were also used against protesters. At least, protest participants said that they heard gunshots. Judging by the number of victims, it is highly likely that firearms were used by law enforcement.

Arbitrary detention and torture

The whereabouts of some detainees and their health conditions are still unknown. According to local testimonies, the bodies of the deceased were returned on the need that their close relatives sign a document stating that the victims died while having been intoxicated or in a narcotic state. The authorities ordered to bury the dead quickly, not allowing their families to observe the necessary national rituals and, even more so, to order a forensic examination of the bodies before burial. In some cases, victims' families were offered money for silence. Such pressure was made upon the family of construction worker Madiyar Orazbayev, who, after his arrest on July 3, was severely beaten and [died](#) from a ruptured scrotum. The street of his house was immediately asphalted, and his parents were offered 100 million Uzbek soums (or about nine thousand USD) for silence. However, the parents refused to take money, demanding that their son's killers be held accountable for this crime. In total, at least two cases of death from torture in custody were reported.

Of particular concern is the fate of the two arrested, opinion leaders Dauletmurat Tajimuratov and journalist Lolagul Kallykhanova. Little or nothing is known about their health condition. At least Kallykhanova's relatives haven't been able to visit and meet with her.

On September 6, the situation with Tajimuratov became a little clearer. According to a [press release](#) issued by the office of the Uzbek Ombudsman, he is currently held in the pre-trial detention facility No. 11 in Urgench, Khorezm Province. Ombudsman Feruza Eshmatova, with members of the parliamentary commission created for an "independent" investigation of the Karakalpak events, visited the detention center and met with Tajimuratov. During the visit, the commission members reported that the suspect's rights had not been violated during his detention and that during the investigation, Tajimuratov was not subjected to mental and physical torture. According to the press release, he had been granted access to a lawyer and had a chance to meet with his relatives. However, the relatives themselves have not yet publicly confirmed the fact of their meeting with Tajimuratov. It should also be noted that Uzbekistan has been denying the defendants their right to select lawyers of their choice, especially on "ordered" and politically motivated cases. In such cases, the lawyer appointed by the authorities persuades the defendant to admit his guilt, allegedly in exchange for mitigation of punishment.

The concern is also that a criminal case against Tajimuratov [has been initiated](#) under part 4 of article 159 (encroachments on the constitutional order) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. If the charges are brought because he called for demonstrations on July 5, then firstly, he notified the local authorities in advance about this. Secondly, such a call is fully consistent with the Constitution, according to article 33, of which citizens "have the right to carry out their public activity in the form of rallies, meetings, and demonstrations." Suppose the prosecutor's office considers in his actions a call for the withdrawal of Karakalpakstan from Uzbekistan. In that case, such a right is enshrined in the Constitution: these are those articles that the central authorities would abolish but eventually withdraw the relevant amendments.

In principle, the charges under Article 159, as a rule, are politically motivated in Uzbekistan. If so, then Tajimuratov is unlikely to count on a full-fledged lawyer's defense and acquittal in court. This, in turn, raises the question about **the status of the judiciary** in the country. This judiciary has been and remains not independent and de facto controlled by the executive. That is why the defendants in politically motivated cases are unlikely to face due trials and fairly court rulings driven exclusively by the spirit and the letter of the law.

Right to information

Access to the Internet was restricted as early as June 27 but completely blocked by the evening of July 1, which led to many in the republic being unaware for a certain period of the president's decision to withdraw the draft amendments in question. Only on July 18 the Internet began to turn on, but only for an hour a day. By July 24, access had increased slightly, but only for a few hours a day, albeit not remaining unavailable in the evenings.

On the first day of the protests, entry into the republic was sharply restricted, which is probably why the press was not on the ground in the midst of the events, that is, on July 1 and 2. British journalist Joanna Lillis, who arrived in Nukus on July 3, was briefly detained by the police and forced to remove photos and videos she had taken in Nukus from her gadgets.

The authorities massively seized gadgets from citizens, demanding the owners remove photos and videos taken from the scenes of events. Thus, the primary information base has been narrowed, reducing the chances of getting a reliable picture of what happened on July 1 and 2. Some Uzbek journalists managed to arrive in Nukus, but only starting on July 3.

Freedom of assembly

As noted above, Tajimuratov and other protesters were arrested, and a number of them were accused by the prosecutor's office of encroaching on the constitutional order and disturbing public order. However, these persons only exercised their constitutional right to participate in demonstrations and rallies. By brutally suppressing these protests and punishing their participants for taking to the streets, the Uzbek authorities show that that this constitutional right in the country remains only on paper.

Freedom of association

Due to restrictions on the registration of non-governmental initiative organizations adopted since Karimov's time, there have not been enough professionally capable NGOs, especially those working on human rights-related issues, to start monitoring and documenting events and alleged human rights violations by the authorities.

Finally, there is **the issue of accountability** for those authorities and officials that directed or tacitly encouraged the use by law enforcement of excessive violence against protesters and torture in custody against the detainees, resulting in many deaths and injuries among the protesters. There are fears that these officials will continue to go unpunished for their crimes, which creates the climate of impunity for committed crimes and gross violations of human rights by the members of ruling regime.

Comparison with the Andijan May 2005 events

Such a comparison is necessary to assess the significance of these events and the authorities' actions in the context of the post-Soviet history of Uzbekistan. In Andijan, the Karimov regime staged a real massacre, shooting a crowd of protesters with large-calibre machine guns and sniper rifles. As a result, according to official data, 187 people were killed, including 27 law enforcement officers, but according to human rights organizations and civil society activists – more than five hundred people were.

The comparison, of course, is not in favor of Karimov, who not only brutally suppressed the protests but also completely ignored calls for an independent investigation. In the current case, the scale of casualties and the use of firearms were comparatively smaller. In addition, President Mirziyoyev immediately made concessions on the main issue, constitutional amendments, and after the events allowed the creation of a parliamentary commission to investigate them, which included three representatives of civil society, as well as representatives of Karakalpakstan.

However, in general, the authorities' actions this July have been quite typical of authoritarian regimes and the political culture that characterizes such regimes. This refers to the following:

- The lack of government's proper dialogue and consultation with society in the preparation of important decisions that affect the vital interests of this society;
- The absence of citizens' fundamental rights to peaceful street protests;
- The excessive use of force in suppressing street protests, arbitrary mass detentions, as well as torture in places of detention;
- The lack of access to information during and after events;
- The weakness of civil society is primarily due to the restrictions on freedom of association that remain in the country.

What is needed first of all

Even after events have passed, it is essential to conduct an independent investigation to obtain an objective and comprehensive picture of what had happened and to identify the persons who should be held accountable for the excessive use of force against the protesters and the victims.

It is hardly possible in this respect to relying entirely on the results of the parliamentary commission's investigation, first of all, because most of it consists of MPs and representatives of pocket parties and organizations wholly controlled by the executive. Given the lack of a sufficiently developed organized civil society in the country, it is necessary to form an international commission, which would include representatives of the relevant UN bodies (special procedures, committees on civil and political rights, as well as against torture), as well as international human rights organizations with a high reputation, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

If Uzbekistan does not allow such an international commission to enter the country and does not create appropriate conditions for its work, international human rights organizations should conduct such an investigation unilaterally, based on the available data, and publish its results, as well as submit it to the relevant bodies of the UN, OSCE and the European Union.

Photo by Shuhrat Latipov, CC BY-SA 4.0. Burned-out street sweeper in Nukus on July 3, 2022. Aftermath of the Karakalpak protests.

<https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/alisher-ilkhamov-on-the-events-in-karakalpakstan-in-early-july-2002/?fbclid=IwAR3PTRFSdEVI6sslORbiYeWICablLirOp1heN7XEclLa50yPOegr5XUJLxPw>