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Uzbek dissident released after 18 years in prison

Reuters (22 February 2017) - <http://reut.rs/2mlJg5P> - Uzbek dissident Muhammad Bekjanov, one of the world's longest-jailed journalists, was released from prison on Wednesday after serving 18 years in prison, his relatives and a local rights group said.

Bekjanov, 63, a former editor of the opposition newspaper Erk, was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 1999 on charges of publishing and distributing a banned newspaper, participating in a banned political protest, and plotting a coup.

He had always denied the charges, which rights groups branded as politically motivate.

"Having mixed feelings today," his daughter Aygul Bekjan, who lives in the United States, wrote on her Facebook page. "I'm so happy to tell everyone that my father is out of prison, but at the same time I'm so mad for the fact that he lost 18 years of his life for nothing!"

Bekjanov's brother, Muhammad Salih, the leader of the Erk party, was a presidential candidate in 1991 and has lived in exile since 1993. In 1999 he was convicted in absentia on terrorism charges, which he denied.

Bekjanov's term was reduced so that he could be set free in 2012 but prison authorities then extended his sentence by five years for having broken unspecified prison rules.

"Muhammad Bekjanov's term ended yesterday and today he was released from jail," Abdurahmon Tashanov, an activist of the Ezgulik rights group told Reuters.

"There had been worries that he could have his term prolonged again as he was put in solitary confinement and barred from visitors in December," Tashanov said.

Bekjanov could not be reached for comment on Wednesday. His release followed that of another dissident, Samandar Kukanov, who was set free last November after serving 22 years in prison.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov died in September after ruling the Central Asian nation of 32 million people with an iron fist for almost 27 years.

His successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has overseen the release of some of Karimov's jailed foes and amnestied several less prominent political prisoners. But analysts expect no significant changes in Uzbekistan's restrictive political environment.

(Reporting by Olzhas Auyezov; Editing by Alison Williams)

Presidential election: Preliminary findings of the OSCE observation mission

See HRWF list of religious prisoners in Uzbekistan (Sunnis, Sufis, Said Nursi Followers, Protestants) [here](#).

OSCE/ODIHR (10.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hsEx0W> - The 4 December presidential election underscored the need of comprehensive reform to address long-standing systemic shortcomings. The legal framework is not conducive to holding democratic elections. The election administration undertook measures to enhance the transparency of its work and prepared efficiently for the election. The dominant position of state actors and limits on fundamental freedoms undermine political pluralism and led to a campaign devoid of genuine competition. Media covered the election in a highly restrictive and controlled environment, and the dissemination of a state-defined narrative did not allow voters to receive an alternative viewpoint. Significant irregularities were noted on election day, including indications of ballot box stuffing and widespread proxy voting, despite a concerted campaign to address the latter. Election commissions faced difficulties in completing the results protocols.

The presidential election is regulated by a multitude of laws and Central Election Commission (CEC) resolutions. Recent legal amendments addressed some previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, mainly of a technical nature. Most other long-standing key recommendations have not yet been addressed. Overall, the electoral legal framework places undue limitations on fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and is restrictively implemented.

Election commissions, led by the CEC, efficiently administered operational aspects during the preelection period, and met all legal deadlines. The CEC held open sessions and promptly published its decisions, thus contributing to the transparency of the electoral process. Important procedures related to election day and the tabulation of results were left unregulated. The CEC conducted a comprehensive voter awareness campaign on state and private media, including against proxy voting.

Four party-nominated candidates, including the prime minister who serves as the acting president, contested the election. The law does not provide for self-nominated candidates. Some candidate eligibility requirements are contrary to international obligations, including those related to residency, language proficiency and criminal convictions. In a positive step, the number of supporting signatures required for candidate registration was lowered from five to one per cent of voters nationwide, thus reducing an obstacle on the right to stand.

Although four candidates stood in the election, they refrained from challenging each other's platforms and government policies. The campaign lacked competitiveness and voters were not presented with a genuine choice of political alternatives. It took place in a highly regulated environment and was characterized by an apparent homogeneity of materials and events of the four candidates. Campaign activities of the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan candidate blurred the line between party and State in contravention of paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

The absence of a centralized voter register and the possibility of registration on election day makes it difficult to ensure that voters were included in only one voter list and voted only once. The lack of safeguards against multiple registration and voting potentially undermines the integrity of the electoral process. Around 20.5 million voters were registered to vote, including some 12,000 abroad.

The legislation stringently defines campaign coverage, while granting each candidate ample free airtime and space within national and regional state media, which markedly exceeded editorial output. Uniform and repetitive reports on candidates' activities consistently featured in a predominantly positive tone, while the airing of their direct speech was confined to pre-recorded campaign messages. Access to national and international analytical and critical websites continued to be blocked. Consequently, the public was shielded from a genuine exchange of political ideas, which effectively compromised voters' ability to make an informed choice.

During an election year, parties receive an equal amount of public funding for campaign-related expenses. Campaign finance transparency is limited by a lack of requirements for public disclosure of expenditures and pre-election reporting by contestants. Private funding to parties or candidates for campaigning is prohibited, which is an undue limitation on citizens' ability to financially support their preferred contestant.

The election dispute resolution process is regulated by several laws and CEC resolutions, which results in a lack of coherence. The law does not provide for requests for recounts or the invalidation of results, thus limiting effective remedy on key aspects of the electoral process. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM has not been made aware of any formal complaints filed to election commissions or the courts.

National minorities enjoy full political rights under the Constitution. Campaign materials were available in three minority languages. The CEC produced most election-related material, including ballots, in Uzbek, Russian and Karakalpak languages. State-owned newspapers with a nationwide reach provided candidates with free print space for campaign messages in Uzbek, Russian, Tajik and Kazakh. Language or identity issues did not feature in the campaign.

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women remain under-represented in elected and executive office. They comprised some 36 and 47 per cent of the DEC and PEC members, respectively. Of the sixteen CEC members, two are women.

Non-partisan citizen observation is not provided for in the law, contrary to paragraph 8 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document. Authorities accredited 548 international and over 37,000 party observers.

Election day was assessed negatively by OSCE/ODIHR EOM observers. Voting was assessed negatively in 12 per cent of observations, with observers noting serious irregularities inconsistent with national legislation and OSCE commitments, including proxy voting and indications of ballot box stuffing. Observers assessed counting negatively in 46 of 77 cases. Reconciliation procedures were not followed in more than half of polling stations observed. PECs faced serious challenges in completing and reconciling the results protocols that often had to be amended during tabulation.

Arrested, threatened, beaten: The Uzbekistan activist who won't give up

BBC News (29.06.2015) - Elena Urlaeva was reportedly subjected to sexual violence by the Uzbek authorities, after years of arrests and beatings. The BBC profiles an activist renowned for her bravery.

It's early morning in a town near the Uzbek capital Tashkent and a large group of local teachers are queuing for a line of buses to take them to work.

Among them is Elena Urlaeva, Uzbekistan's veteran rights activist and thorn in the side of the authorities.

The teachers are not heading for schools and nurseries, but to nearby cotton fields, and Ms Urlaeva is trying to document the practice of forced labour in the cotton industry.

The 58-year-old who heads the unregistered Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan is one of the few remaining independent rights defenders in a country tightly controlled by long-term authoritarian leader Islam Karimov.

Ms Urlaeva is a regular observer of the cotton harvest, a vital cash crop, and on this morning she's chatting to teachers, trying to gather information about the mobilisation of government workers to do unpaid "voluntary" work.

What happened next is based on her own account. The events cannot be verified, but are in keeping with what has happened to her and other activists in the past.

Ms Urlaeva says that when she started taking pictures, plain-clothed officers approached her and demanded her memory card.

It's not in Ms Urlaeva's character to comply with officials easily. So she ran for it.

She was caught and taken to the local police station where an officer accused her of destabilising the country and selling off state secrets. He hit her on the head.

Such treatment was not new to Ms Urlaeva who has endured many similar encounters and whom international rights groups have called the "bravest woman in Uzbekistan".

But what happened next was far worse.

Doctors from a rapid psychiatric unit arrived at the request of the police and sedated her with three injections, she says.

The body search that followed was described by the lobby group Human Rights Watch as a "double cavity search": Ms Urlaeva was held down by several people and the most intimate parts of her body were subjected to inspections.

When that did not produce a result she was taken for an X-ray.

The humiliation didn't stop there. Ms Urlaeva was refused permission to use the toilet and was told to go outside.

"We will film you," she says she was told. "If you complain about what happened here we will put the footage of your bare backside all over the internet."

The brutality of the treatment Ms Urlaeva says she received has shocked her supporters. International rights groups from Amnesty International to Human Rights Watch reported her ordeal. The US and the European Union also expressed their concern.

But the report doesn't come as a surprise.

Ms Urlaeva has probably done more than anyone to observe, document and expose Uzbekistan's state-sponsored forced labour system, which has been condemned by international human rights groups and the International Labour Organization.

"The Uzbek government uses forced labour, including child labour to harvest a crop from which only the elite profit," Andrew Stroehlein from Human Rights Watch says. "She was investigating this corrupt and abusive practice of forced labour."

Ms Urlaeva's persistent work contributed to an international campaign which ultimately led major global brands to join a boycott of Uzbek cotton.

As a result, Uzbekistan began to eliminate at least the practice of child labour in the harvest with teachers, doctors and civil servants now making up the numbers.

Elena Urlaeva's journey as a human rights activist began almost 20 years ago when she helped her brother who was caught up in a child custody case.

It was the first time she fell foul of the authorities. She was charged with hooliganism and fired from her job with the state broadcasting company.

Charges of hooliganism, detention and forced sectioning in psychiatric hospitals are well documented methods used by the authorities to silence and intimidate dissidents and activists - practices rolled over from the Soviet era.

Ms Urlaeva has suffered all of them.

She has been arrested, beaten, threatened - and was held in psychiatric institutions on many occasions amounting to many months of forced treatment and medication.

She's campaigned on numerous issues, from opposing the destruction of homes for public building projects, to highlighting corruption, torture and false imprisonment.

There seems to be almost no cause she won't pick up. This year she campaigned against the re-election of President Karimov. And on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two she interviewed veterans to highlight poor living conditions.

Her work, documenting abuses with photographs or first-hand interviews with relatives of victims, has been a rare source of information for human rights organisations as well as the media.

In a country where public protests are unheard of, she has held numerous mini-demonstrations - often alone, holding a self-made placard.

She's been whisked away many times - sometimes she's been stopped at her own front door.

Her family has been put under pressure too. Ms Urlaeva's 11-year-old adopted son has suffered bullying at school and has been beaten up near his home by teenagers set up to ambush him.

After every attack Ms Urlaeva has come back - although not always stronger. Her health has suffered, but not it seems her determination.

In the latest correspondence following her ordeal Elena Urlaeva wrote that she was undergoing medical treatment for her injuries and looking for a lawyer to "take on her abusers".

"When I finish with the treatment I will continue my fight against modern day slavery," she wrote.

In recent weeks she has since been arrested once more but is currently out of custody.

Two women convicted for religious, extremist Internet propaganda

Interfax (02.03.2015) - Two citizens of Uzbekistan have been convicted of spreading religious extremism and propaganda for the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* organization, which is banned in Uzbekistan, using the Internet an official form the Uzbek Prosecutor General's Office told *Interfax* on Monday.

"Robia Buribekova and Nilufar Ubaidullayeva, residents of the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan, have been convicted for spreading propaganda for the organization *Hizb ut-Tahrir* on the Internet," the source said.

The source said Buribekova had used the instant messaging program *WhatsApp* to create online extremist groups and talked with her foreign accomplices, promoting *Hizb ut-Tahrir* ideas.

Ubaidullayeva joined her later.

"Along with the propaganda, they disseminated on social networking sites false information tarnishing the reputation of prominent scientists, religious figures and statesmen," the source said.

The Uzbek Prosecutor General's Office official did not say what punishment was given to the women.

Under Uzbek legislation, such crimes can be punished by five to eight years in prison.

HRWF Footnote: See our report "Religions, Violence and Human Rights: The European Court and Hizb ut-Tahrir"
