

UZBEKISTAN: Uzbek dissident released after 18 years in prison

Reuters (22 February 2017) – <http://reut.rs/2m1Jg5P> – 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)

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