



FREEDOM NOW

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Working Session 2: Fundamental freedoms I, including freedom of peaceful assembly and association

Speaker: Ms. Maran Turner

Thank you. I welcome the opportunity to address OSCE members and fellow civil society organizations on the troubling restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly and association in Tajikistan.

Since 2015, the Government of Tajikistan has arrested and imprisoned nearly 200 political opposition members and sentenced them to lengthy prison terms on charges designed to discredit and dismantle any viable political opposition. Deeply concerning, the government has also imprisoned and harassed lawyers who represented these prisoners.

The government's primary target in the crackdown is the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan or IRPT. Once the country's largest opposition party with 43,000 members, the government has banned the party and arrested most of its top leadership. Tajikistan's campaign against the IRPT began shortly before the March 2015 parliamentary elections when several news articles appeared in state-run newspapers that accused the IRPT of terrorism. Imams at state-controlled mosques also delivered sermons, which were reprinted in newspapers, denouncing the IRPT and its link to terrorism. After the IRPT received only 1.5% of the vote in the elections and lost both its seats in parliament, the government ordered the party to close and banned its operations. Shortly thereafter, the government accused IRPT members of initiating a failed coup. Mahmadali Hayit is the deputy chairman of IRPT and one of a dozen top leaders arrested for allegedly participating in this coup. He was sentenced to life in prison after a closed trial. Buzurgmehr Yorov and Nuriddin Makhkamov, two lawyers who represented IRPT members, were arrested and sentenced to 29 years and 23 years, respectively on charges intended to end their legitimate human rights work.

Group 24 is another opposition group that has faced reprisals from the Tajikistani government. In October 2014, the group used social media to call for mass, peaceful demonstrations in Dushanbe. In response, authorities blocked up to 300 various websites and shut down all SMS services. On the day before the planned protest, the Supreme Court ruled Group 24 was a terrorist organization. Since then, the government has arrested at least eight members of the organization, sentencing them to up to 17 years in prison. It has also sought the extradition of group members living abroad in Moldova, Belarus, and Russia.

A final example is Zayd Saidov, a well-known businessman and former Tajikistani government official. He was arrested in May 2013 after he announced the creation of the New Tajikistan Party, along with plans to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Mr. Saidov was charged with “bigamy or polygamy”, “illegal deprivation of an individual’s freedom”, rape, fraud, and bribery. The trial was plagued with procedural irregularities and blatant violations. In the days after his arrest, propaganda slandering Mr. Saidov was distributed in the form of news stories on television and flyers handed out in the streets. The trial itself was closed to the public, even though Tajikistani law dictates that media and the public should have access to the proceedings. Mr. Saidov was convicted on all five charges on December 25, 2013 and sentenced to 26 years in prison. Nearly a year later, prosecutors brought additional charges of forgery, abuse of office, embezzlement, and tax evasion. He was convicted of these charges in August 2015 and three years were added to his sentence.

A shocking addendum to Mr. Saidov’s case is the treatment of his lawyer, Shukrat Kudratov. One of Tajikistan’s most prominent lawyers, Mr. Kudratov has represented numerous victims of the government’s crackdown on civil society, including opposition activists, victims of police torture, and individuals accused of religious extremism. The Tajikistani government arrested Mr. Kudratov in July 2014 and sentenced him to 14 years in prison, later reduced to three years and eight months. Mr. Kudratov’s arrest came the day after he sent a letter to NGOs, the news media, and various diplomatic missions highlighting grave procedural violations in Mr. Saidov’s prosecution. The letter detailed the ongoing attacks on Mr. Kudratov and other members of Mr. Saidov’s legal team, including threats of imprisonment and death.

These actions are in clear violation of Tajikistan’s international obligations and its commitments as a member of the OSCE.

Recommendations

We call on Tajikistan to end its repression of political opposition groups and to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners in the country.