

Uzbekistan: Harassment and intimidation of opposition activists

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Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) are concerned that authorities of Uzbekistan harassed and intimidated Khidirnazar Allakulov (Truth and Progress party / Haqiqat va Taraqqiyot), Mahmud Davronov (Free Motherland party / Ozod Vatan) and Jahongir Otajonov (Erk) and other outspoken opposition activists in the run-up of Presidential elections in October 2021 and that many continue to be at risk and under surveillance. **AHRCA and IPHR call on the authorities to stop harassing and intimidating these and other political opposition activists and their families and to allow opposition political parties to register.**

According to official information, incumbent President Shavkat Mirziyoyev won the presidential elections held in Uzbekistan on 24 October 2021 by more than 80 percent of the vote. As highlighted by international observers, the elections were characterised by the lack of meaningful competition. While only officially registered political parties are allowed to put forward presidential candidates, no genuine opposition parties have succeeded in obtaining registration in the country and therefore were not able to nominate candidates for the elections.

International election observers deployed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights noted in their preliminary findings issued on 25 October that the *"lack of genuine competition, combined with the burdensome requirements for party registration, challenge the pluralistic nature of the political environment in which the election is taking place."* They also observed *"a virtual absence of critical reporting about higher public officials and candidates [...]. The overall restrictive legal framework for media, cases of pre-trial detention, intimidation and harassment of journalists and bloggers and an established practice of blocking websites contributed to self-censorship and further limited the amount of information and analysis available to the public."*

In its concluding observations issued in April 2020 the United Nations Human Rights Committee raised concerns about discrepancies between domestic legislation and Uzbekistan's obligations as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and called on Uzbekistan to foster *"a culture of political pluralism and (refrain) from arbitrarily denying registration to opposition political parties and preventing their participation in elections."*

Khidirnazar Allakulov, leader of the opposition party Truth and Progress, harassed and under close surveillance

Khidirnazar Allakulov, a former university director in the southern Surkhandarya region and chair of the opposition party Truth and Progress, publicly announced his intention to stand in the presidential elections in autumn 2020. He subsequently reported facing internet trolling, surveillance and other intimidation, including being detained for questioning and physically attacked by unknown perpetrators.

In the days before the elections Allakulov's telephone was cut off, and he reports seeing a device outside his apartment building that he believes jammed telephone and internet connections. There are also allegations that several administrative and civil cases were opened against him, his daughter and his son with the intention to put a stop to his political activism.

Allakulov told a journalist from the news outlet *Nastoyaschie Vremya* on 24 October 2021 that he had been forced to suspend his political activities following pressure against him, his children and grandchildren. More recently, he announced his intention to try again to set up a political party named Equality, Progress and Unity (*Haqiqat, Taraqqiyot ba birdamliq*).

The Ministry of Justice denied registration to the Truth and Progress party because of its alleged failure to gather the number of signatures required by law. However, many of its supporters reported withdrawing their signatures after being threatened with reprisals by state bodies and representatives of *makhalla* (neighbourhood) committees.

Mahmud Davronov, activist of the opposition group Free Motherland, harassed and intimidated

Mahmud Davronov, co-chair of the newly founded opposition party Free Motherland and former deputy chair of the opposition Truth and Progress party, has reportedly been subjected to intimidation, surveillance and temporary detention aimed at discouraging him from continuing his political activities.

On 26 May 2021, for example, Davronov was detained three times in one day by traffic police and police officials attempted to seize his car, claiming that he had not paid fines, although he maintains that he paid them as soon as they were issued. On 5 June, he was removed from a bus as he travelled to attend a meeting of the Truth and Progress party and held for three hours by police who made veiled threats that he and his relatives would suffer if he continued with his political activism.

As the elections approached and Davronov continued his political work, pressure against him intensified. On 9 October Davronov and political activist and blogger Alexei Garshin, met with OSCE representatives to discuss the upcoming elections. On 16 October Davronov gave an interview to Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbekistani branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and criticised people in Uzbekistan being deprived of the right to vote in free and fair elections.

On 22 October a film crew from the German media outlet Deutsche Welle visited Davronov.

Davronov faced multiple repercussions for his activism: a few days before the presidential elections, he learned that he had been banned from leaving the country because of alleged utility debts – in early November 2021 this ban was lifted, but he erroneously remained on the government’s list of people failing to pay their gas and water bills.

On 19 October, the head of the Samarkand Gas department (OlbGaz) visited Davronov’s house and told his wife, Zebo Khalilova, who owns the house, that she owed 2,490,000 Uzbek sums (equivalent to approx. 245 EUR) for alleged arrears in payments. Davronov and Khalilova disputed this but Khalilova nevertheless paid the fine, and noticed her husband’s name on the fine, instead of her own. It is believed that this fine from the gas company was an attempt to list Davronov as a debtor, and thus thwart his political aspirations.

Also on 19 October, a representative from the Water Services of the city of Samarkand (Gorvodokanal) issued Davronov with another fine for 2,940,000 soums (equivalent to approx. 250 EUR), despite the fact that his name is not on the water bills. Davronov’s wife spoke to the water company who withdrew the fine after admitting there was no outstanding debt. A representative of the water services company admitted that he had signed a pre-prepared form filled in by persons he did not know, but whom he could not refuse.

On 20 October, Davronov discovered that his name had been added to the list of debtors on the state database “Portal of interactive public services”¹, and that he was banned from leaving Uzbekistan.

On 21 October, Davronov received a call from a Radio Ozodlik journalist. Davronov told him about the recent harassment and then they agreed on a time later that day for a live interview. Davronov believes that security services were listening in on this conversation because 15 minutes before the interview was supposed to start his phone, internet and electricity were switched off.

On 22 October Davronov received two letters from the Administrative Court demanding

payment for court fees amounting to 540 000 soums (equivalent to approx. 44 EUR) in relation to the alleged gas and water debts.

On 2 November, the database of the Prosecutor General’s Office showed that Davronov has been removed from the list of persons banned from leaving Uzbekistan, but he erroneously remains on the list of debtors who allegedly did not pay their gas and water bills.

Jahongir Otojanov, member of the opposition party Erk, prevented from travelling abroad

Erk activist Jahongir Otajonov has faced harassment and intimidation by state and non-state actors to dissuade him from engaging in political opposition activities.

For example, on 26 May 2021, the day when the longstanding opposition party Erk announced that Jahongir Otajonov, a well-known singer, should run as their presidential candidate, a group of unknown local people broke into his house, shouted insults at him and pelted his house with eggs.

1 <https://my.gov.uz/>

Otajonov was summoned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs at least three times in June and July 2021. Reportedly, officials urged him to stop his political activities and threatened him with reprisals against members of his family unless he complied. He subsequently reduced his activities, but continues to be a member of the Erk party.

Nevertheless, Jahongir Otajonov reported renewed intimidation: he was barred from leaving the country on 17 October because of the alleged failure to pay child support, an accusation he said was false.