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Europe/Ex-USSR - Tajikistan

Arbitrary arrest

Visiting researcher held after interviewing government critic

24 June 2014

Reporters Without Borders calls for the release of Aleksandr Sodiqov, a Toronto-based Tajik blogger and university researcher who was arrested during a visit to Tajikistan on 16 June and is being held on a spying charge.

A specialist in conflict prevention, **Sodiqov** was [arrested](#) in Khorog, the capital of the autonomous southeastern province of Gorno-Badakhshan, after interviewing local opposition leader Alim Sherzamonov.

After saying nothing for three days, the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) [announced](#) on 19 June that Sodiqov had been arrested and transferred to Dushanbe, the capital.

Sodiqov was born in Tajikistan and worked there for ten years for international NGOs and organizations. He has been a Canadian resident since 2012, working as a researcher at Toronto University. He also keeps [a blog](#) and writes for [Global Voices](#) on political and social issues in Tajikistan and neighbouring countries.

He went to Khorog under a conflict management and resolution programme run by Britain's Exeter University. The day after his arrest, his computer was seized in a search of his mother's home. The GKNB said he was suspected of spying for a foreign government although his research director at Exeter University submitted documents explaining his presence.

On 18 and 19 June, the regional state TV station broadcast heavily [edited](#) extracts of a video of Sodiqov's interrogation, in which he appears to be under pressure. [According to viewers](#), he quoted Sherzamonov as having said: "If in 2012, the people of Badakhshan no longer trusted the security forces then, in 2014, they no longer trust the government and the Aga Khan."

It would seem that the video and attribution of controversial comments are designed to discredit Sherzamonov, a well-known civil society activist and parliamentary representative of the Social Democrat Party, who has denied making them.

"The secrecy surrounding Sodiqov's detention and the televising of extracts of his interrogation violate his right to a fair trial," said Johann Bihr, the head of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk. *"His arrest is the result of the Tajik government's paranoia and tendency to blame foreigners for the unrest in Tajikistan instead of facing up to its own responsibilities."*

Bihr added: *"Sodiqov must be released at once and the absurd charges brought against him must be dropped. It is time the government stopped raising the spectre of civil war in order to silence its critics and justify cracking down."*

Sherzamonov was the uncle of one of two men gunned down by police in Khorog on 21 May and was [one of the leaders](#) of the ensuing anti-government protests, which turned in a [riot](#).

Armed clashes in July 2012 that had Khorog as their epicentre have been the subject of [a tight information blackout ever since](#). GKNB chief Saymumin Yatimov [said](#) on 19 June that Tajikistan's security was threatened by foreign spies operating "under the cover of NGOs."

Since 10 June, YouTube and other Google services have been [partially blocked](#) in Tajikistan, which is ranked 115th out of 180 countries in [the 2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

For more information:

- Go to [the "Release A. Sodiqov" campaign site](#)
 - Sign [the petition](#) for Sodiqov's release
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