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Europe/Ex-USSR - Uzbekistan

Muhammad Bekjanov

Journalist held for 16 years must be freed at once

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As Uzbekistan prepares to receive a visit from UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon on 12 June, Reporters Without Borders and the [Association for Human Rights in Central Asia](#) call on the authorities to immediately release **Muhammad Bekjanov**, one of the world's longest held journalists.

[Awarded the Reporters Without Borders press freedom prize in 2013](#), Bekjanov used to edit Uzbekistan's main opposition newspaper. Married, the father of three children and now aged 60, he has been held for the past 16 years.

As the editor of *Erk* (Freedom) in the early 1990s, Bekjanov tried to start a debate on such taboo subjects as the state of the economy, the use of forced labour for the cotton harvest and the Aral Sea environmental disaster. As result, he became one of the leading bugbears of President Islam Karimov, who was then forging the authoritarian regime he still leads.

Karimov took advantage of a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999 to silence his critics. Like many pro-democracy activists, Bekjanov was tried as an accomplice and was [sentenced](#) to 15 years in prison. His sentence was reduced in 2003 but in January 2012, just a few days before he was due to be released, he was sentenced to another four years and eight months in jail on a charge of disobeying prison officials under article 221 of the criminal code.

Yusuf Ruzimuradov, a fellow *Erk* journalist who was arrested at the same time as Bekjanov, is also still being held.

Prevented from seeing his lawyer

The authorities are currently preventing Bekjanov from seeing his lawyer, Polina Braunerg. When Braunerg went to the prison with a permit to see him on 29 April, she was told that he was on a National Security Service "blacklist" and that no information could be provided about him.

"I waited to see my client for more than five hours in 38-degree Celsius heat without anyone trying to explain to me where he was," she said.

Reporters Without Borders and the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia are extremely concerned about this latest display of contempt for Bekjanov's rights.

"Muhammad Bekjanov must be given access to medical and legal assistance as a matter of urgency," said Nadezhda Atayeva, the head of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia. *"The prison conditions have had a grave affect on his health and we fear they could be fatal."*

Johann Bühr, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk, added: *"Nearly 16 years after his initial conviction, it is unacceptable that neither Bekjanov, his family or his lawyer have been given copies of the court decisions that have been taken in his case."*

Bekjanov is being held hostage by the regime. His brother, the well-known poet and government opponent Muhammad Salikh, was the only person to run against Karimov in the December 1991 presidential election. Officially, he got less than 13 percent of the votes although independent observers thought he had won. Violence was used to crush pro-Salikh student demonstrations and opposition newspapers were quickly closed down.

Tortured, denied medical attention

Bekjanov has been [repeatedly tortured](#) since his arrest. During the initial investigation, he was beaten all over his body, including the head and ribs, until he lost consciousness. One of his legs was broken during a beating in 2003 but he was denied any medical treatment. He has lost many teeth and much of his hearing as a result of the torture and a serious case of tuberculosis that was left untreated for a long time.

When his wife, Nina Bekjanova, visited him in 2014, she noticed that he was suffering from intermittent acute pain as well as permanent discomfort from an inguinal hernia that developed when he was assigned to prison work making bricks. His general condition is one of extreme physical and mental exhaustion.

At least [eight other journalists](#) are currently detained in connection with their work in Uzbekistan. Many government opponents, human rights defenders and other civil society activists also languish in prison, as do thousands of individuals who are arbitrarily accused of "religious extremism."

The prolonged detention of political prisoners under article 221 of the criminal code is widespread. False testimony is used to convict them, in flagrant violation of their right to due process. Sentences are often extended several times in succession in a manner that is tantamount to life imprisonment.

Reporters Without Borders and the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia are sending a copy of this press release to the UN special rapporteur on torture and to the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

(Photo: Uznews)

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- Uzbekistan PR_11-06-2015_UZ, (PDF - 152.6 kb)
 - Uzbekistan PR_11-06-2015_RU, (PDF - 168.2 kb)
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