

Tajikistan: Unusual Protests Helped by Authorities' Invisible Hand?

Tajikistan is not a place that sees a lot of protests these days. So it is a cause for wonder when demonstrators spontaneously gather outside the US Embassy and United Nations offices in Dushanbe to air complaints that mirror authorities' stated views - without facing any serious challenge from law enforcement authorities.

Such was the case on April 5-6, when protestors assembled to criticize a Ukrainian court decision not to extradite former Prime Minister Abdumalik Abdullajanov, who is wanted in Dushanbe for attempting to overthrow President Imomali Rakhmon back in the mid-1990s. [Abdullajanov](#) - who has refugee status in the United States - was released from a Ukrainian jail on April 4. The UN urged Kyiv not to send him to Tajikistan, reasoning that it was unlikely he would receive a fair trial at home.

Local media estimated that about 200 people overall participated in simultaneous protests on April 5, waving banners calling Abdullajanov a criminal and demanding that he face justice. About 15 people organized a picket outside UN offices the next day. Few Tajiks seemed concerned about Abdullajanov's fate while he was in detention, so the protests have sparked widespread speculation they were organized by authorities angry at the Ukrainian court's decision - and, implicitly, at Washington for granting him asylum.

Under Tajik law, any demonstration, even if only one person participates, must receive official permission. After opposition members asked why authorities allowed these rallies, and forbid, for example, a rally over the deaths of civilian Muslims in Gaza last year, the Interior Ministry called the demonstrations illegal and said it had arrested "four or five" protestors for "disturbing public order," but did not release names or comment further.

Nuriddin Karshiboev, chairman of the National Association of Independent Media (NANSMIT) expressed befuddlement over the protests. "Tajikistan's youth stands far from politics," he told EurasiaNet.org. "The students with banners who were demanding the extradition of the 'criminal Abdullajanov' ... were born after he had left the country. It is unlikely the protesters clearly knew what they were protesting against."

Where the protests go from here is unclear. The US Embassy issued a security warning for US citizens on April 9. Meanwhile, the UN office approached the Tajik Foreign Ministry, the National Security Committee and the Interior Ministry requesting extra security, a staff member confirmed to EurasiaNet.org.

Human rights activist Dilrabo Samadova, head of the young lawyers' association [Amparo](#), which authorities shut down last year, told EurasiaNet.org that she remembers only one comparable event. "A similar rally involving university students took place in Khujand [in 2009]. Professors released them [students] from classes so they could march along the streets carrying banners in support of purchasing shares in the Rogun hydropower plant," she said, referring to President Rahmon's dream project, the completion of the [world's tallest hydroelectric dam](#).

"There was no youth or civil initiative behind that jolly demonstration. Local functionaries and the university administration just wanted to impress central authorities with their patriotism," said Samadova. She said all signs suggested that the April 5-6 rallies were organized from above.

More than a few participants in discussions on social networks, especially Facebook, have expressed a similar belief -- that authorities organized the early April protests to give the Abdullajanov extradition request a veneer of popular support.

Social networks have been an apparent source of concern for authorities in recent years. Facebook has been [blocked](#) several times in the past year, often for "prophylactic maintenance." And last week, [once again](#), the state communications agency ordered local Internet service providers to block access to the video-sharing platform YouTube, the head of one telecoms provider in Dushanbe confirmed to EurasiaNet.org.

In a withering critique posted on the Ozodagon news agency's web site, journalist Marat Mamadshoev called on Tajik authorities to focus on domestic problems, rather than worry about trying to silence critics abroad.

"Authorities must have known that the ex-premier has refugee status in the United States. They should have crossed him off the wanted list," Mamadshoev wrote on April 5. "The internal situation is far more dangerous: [...] employment opportunities are not being created, people are disappointed by the authorities, by the judicial system, by everything that is going on."

"Instead of countering problems and conducting reforms, they [authorities] are chasing yesterday's phantoms," Mamadshoev added.

Editor's note:

Konstantin Parshin is a freelance writer based in Tajikistan

<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66816>