

THE OBSERVATORY - PRESS RELEASE

UZBEKISTAN: Release of human rights defenders a positive sign, others must follow

Paris-Geneva, October 6, 2017 - *The recent release of human rights defenders Azam Formonov and Salijon Abdurakhmanov after long years in prison on spurious charges marks a long-awaited first practical step in alleviating the plight of defenders in Uzbekistan. The Observatory, a partnership of FIDH and OMCT (World Organisation Against Torture), calls for their full rehabilitation and for an immediate release of other defenders still in detention.*

The exact number of political prisoners in Uzbekistan is hard to establish due to closeness of the regime over last 28 years, marked by continuous impunity and repressions.

Since Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office as President after Islam Karimov's passing away in August 2016, eight government critics, including five human rights defenders¹, are reported to have been released, some after spending more than two decades in prison and one from psychiatric facility. However, two of them, including journalist and human rights defender **Muhammad Bekjon**, regained their freedom at the end of their prison term.

On October 3, 2017, Mr. **Azam Formonov**, defender of farmers' rights and former Chairman of the Syrdarya regional branch of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), was released. He had been sentenced to nine years in prison in 2006 on fabricated charges of extortion. In 2015, days before the end of his prison term, he was sentenced to five additional years in prison for alleged prison rules' violations.

On October 4, 2017, Mr. **Salijon Abdurakhmanov**, a human rights defender, journalist and contributor to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *Radio Free Europe* and other media, was freed in turn. He had been arrested in 2008 on trumped-up drug-related charges and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Both have been conditionally released.

"Lately President Mirziyoyev's regime sent several positive signs suggesting first liberalisation efforts to take place after an almost 30 year-long dictatorship. Yet more systemic and systematic changes are now needed to prevent a roll-back effect and also to repair the injustice, as none of them should never have been arrested and sentenced", commented the Observatory.

The Observatory hails the release of these two prominent civil society actors, but reminds that other human rights defenders, including Ms. **Zulkhumor Khamdamova** and Messrs. **Israil Kholdorov**, **Yuldosh Rasulov**, **Akzam Turgunov**, **Dilmurod Saidov**, **Gaybullo Jalilov**, **Ganikhon Mamatkhanov**, **Mekhrinso Khamdamova**, **Chuan Mamatkulov**, and **Farkhidin Tillaev**, continue to be arbitrarily detained.

The Observatory calls upon the Uzbek authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all detained human rights defenders as well as to ensure in all circumstances that defenders in the country are able to carry out their legitimate activities without any hindrance and fear of reprisals.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective

¹ Namely Messrs. **Bobomurad Razzakov**, **Muhammad Bekjon**, **Jamshid Karimov**, **Azam Formonov**, and **Solijon Abdurakhmanov**.



The Observatory
for the Protection
of Human Rights Defenders

of this program is to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders. FIDH and OMCT are both members of ProtectDefenders.eu, the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism implemented by international civil society.

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