Anti-government protests shake Uzbekistan

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The Uzbek government is continuing to crack down on anti-government protesters who took to the streets in early July to oppose central authorities' plans to strip the region of Karakalpakstan of its right to autonomy. Last Friday, the country's state prosecutor announced it is charging well-known opposition journalist Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov with "conspiracy to overthrow constitutional order." He is facing a prison sentence of up to 20 years. Hundreds more are still in detention, and another reporter critical of the government has allegedly disappeared.

The largest protests in Uzbekistan in 17 years erupted a week-and-a-half ago in the cities of Nukus, Chimbay, Muynak and elsewhere after the federal government announced that a forthcoming referendum on changes to the constitution would include proposals to end the formal sovereignty and right to secede of Karakalpakstan, a 64,200 square mile autonomous region in the country's northwest that is home to about 2 million people.

Tens of thousands took to the streets, where they were met with stun grenades, smoke bombs, baton charges and live fire by police dispatched from Tashkent. According to official accounts, 500 were arrested, 18 killed and 243 injured, including 18 on the government's side. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has declared a state of emergency until August 2, which includes a nighttime curfew.

Authorities denounced the protests as the product of "criminal groups" and "outside interference" led by those intending to destabilize Uzbekistan through fomenting inter-ethnic strife. But in a concession signifying deep concern over their ability to control the situation, they also said they would remove the proposed change to the region's status from the constitutional reforms.

Karkalpakstan is a deeply impoverished ecological disaster zone where social discontent over poverty, joblessness, forced child labor and government indifference to the debilitating health effects of being among the most polluted places on earth runs deep. The multi-ethnic autonomous republic, in which Karkalpaks, Uzbeks and Kazakhs each make up about 30 percent of the population, is home to the now-dead Aral Sea.

The completely empty former body of water, drained through decades of misuse by Soviet bureaucrats, is a toxic dump whose dried-out bottom—filled with salts, fertilizers and pesticides—is picked up by the winds and spread across the region. Residents suffer from extremely high rates of anemia, respiratory diseases and cancers, the latter also fueled by elevated levels of uranium in over half of Karakalpakstan's water sources. A defunct biological weapons lab stationed on one of the Aral Sea's islands has led to high levels of anthrax in the area's soil. The central government in Tashkent has done nothing to address these problems.

Speaking to Lenta.ru, political scientist Rafuel Sattarov noted that while the protests took the form of a defense of separatist principles, the real issues fueling the demonstrations are socioeconomic. The population's "discontent is concentrated around three words—unemployment, the lack of water, and the growth of prices," he observed.

Uzbekistan as a whole is currently being crushed by inflation, with the United Nations Human Development program recently listing the country as one of 20 in the world hardest hit by rising prices. Essential commodities like sugar, for instance, which is widely used to make jams and preserve fruits to get households through the winter, is disappearing from shelves and only available at a high cost. In Karakalpakstan, even before the present crisis, stores generally did not even bother to carry meat, as it was unaffordable for most.

Highly dependent on foreign remittances—in April 2020, for instance, Uzbek workers sent home more than $1 billion—the combined effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Russian sanctions is hammering living standards in Uzbekistan and across Central Asia. While the World Bank, an ardent supporter of Tashkent's recent right-wing economic reforms, hails the fact that only 4.5 million people out of 35 million total live below the poverty index of $1.90 a day, the tens of millions of Uzbek citizens surviving on less than $5 a day are no doubt unaware of their comfortable reality.

In 2019, President Mirziyoyev unveiled a privatization program that whet foreign appetites. Full or partial stakes in over 620 highly profitable companies are being put up for sale, including major financial, energy and infrastructure firms, such as Uzbekneftegaz, Navoi Mining and Metallurgical Combine, Uzbekistan Airways, Uzbekistan Railways and car manufacturer Uzavtosanoat. Gas giant Uzbekneftegaz accounts for 15 percent of the country's GDP. There are plans to completely privatize the chemical, tourism, manufacturing, food and beverage and finance sectors.

The government's economic decrees also included the

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creation of “special economic zones” that allow overseas corporations to set up tax- and regulation-free enterprises, as well as the establishment of various investment advisory boards and implementation of procedural changes aimed at smoothing the process of bringing in foreign capital. In 2019 alone, foreign direct investment grew by 266 percent. With financing from London-based bank Deloitte, the International Finance Corporation, part of the World Bank, just signed a deal in February to assist in the privatization of JSC Ferganazoot, one of Uzbekistan’s largest chemical and fertilizer corporations.

All of the measures undertaken to bring about such results involve wage cuts, gutting workers’ rights and jacking up the cost of basic goods and services. A recent report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) insists, for instance, that Uzbekistan’s “energy market reform” be accompanied by the “withdrawal of subsidies”—i.e., the ending of government spending that holds down the price of gas for ordinary people so that they have a chance of being able to heat their homes and turn on their stoves. According to the IEA, 40 percent of the country’s natural gas goes to this “residential sector.”

In other words, from the standpoint of the world’s investors, too much of Uzbekistan’s gas is ending up in the hands of the population at too low prices, and it ought to be put on a competitive market where the wealthy can profit from it. The vultures are circling.

UK Trade Minister Mike Freer visited Tashkent in early June with a delegation of top business executives from London Stock Exchange, Standard Chartered bank, Arup and TheCityUK “keen to support Uzbekistan’s ambitious privatisation programme,” noted an official statement from London. Freer held discussions with the heads of Uzbekistan’s Airports and Almalyk Mining, which in addition to being the country’s only copper producer also extracts 90 percent of its silver and 20 percent of its gold. Turkey sent a delegation to the capital in March in pursuit of trade, finance and security deals. India is also showing increased interest in securing economic agreements with the country to its northwest.

Uzbekistan is an economically and geopolitically strategic country, whose money-making potentials and significance in the raging conflict between the West and Russia are growing. The country’s working masses are caught in the middle of this both in terms of the miserable social conditions they face and the grand political games being played all around them.

The country sits on 5.5 billion tons of known oil, gas and coal reserves. It is home to one of the world’s largest open-pit gold mines. It is an important energy transit route for China, which for several years has competed with Russia as Uzbekistan’s biggest outside investor. As noted in a July 7 article in *Al Jazeera*, the US openly “speaks of using counterterrorism and security cooperation [in the region] to counterbalance Russia,” with a delegation of American representatives dispatched to Central Asia in June for the purpose of pursuing these aims.

In response to the unrest in Uzbekistan’s northwest, the Kremlin issued a statement saying that Putin spoke with the country’s president and “expressed support for the efforts of the leadership of Uzbekistan to stabilize the situation in Karakalpakstan.” Moscow is deeply concerned that the United States will draw Tashkent ever more into its orbit.

Its worries are not misplaced. In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Uzbekistan’s foreign minister demanded of Moscow, “The military actions and violence must be stopped right away.” He declared, “The Republic of Uzbekistan recognizes Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. We do not recognize the Luhansk and Donetsk republics.”

For its part, in response to the state-directed violence in Karakalpakstan, the United States issued a mealy-mouthed statement in which it signaled that it cared not in the slightest about the dead, injured and arrested. It urged “all sides” to seek a “peaceful resolution” and called on “authorities to pursue a full, credible and transparent investigation into the violence, consistent with international norms and best practices,” in the words of State Department spokesman Ned Price. In short, it told Uzbekistan’s president, “Go right ahead and shoot, but make a gesture at a cover up after the fact.”

In explaining Washington’s response, Maximilian Hess, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, observed, “Mirziyoyev may not be a democrat, but he has … proven to be someone the world, including the West, can do business with.”

Whether the United States will continue in this vein, however, depends on Tashkent’s willingness to break with Moscow. As one commentator writing in *Foreign Policy* magazine noted on July 6, “Uzbekistan is at a vital crossroads, both in terms of its geography and its policy choices. If the country decides to confront what has happened [in Karakalpakstan] head on and maintain openness that it has developed, it is well positioned to reap benefits.” The “openness” being spoken of is not the democratic rights of Uzbekistan’s people, but Tashkent’s “openness” to Washington. If President Mirziyoyev fails to pursue this, he may discover that the White House has suddenly become a most ardent defender of the Karakalpak people.

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