

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Interim President Should Amnesty Political Prisoners

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(Brussels) [Uzbek](#) authorities should immediately and unconditionally release imprisoned political activist Samandar Kukanov, whose sentence has been arbitrarily extended for three years by Uzbek prison authorities, the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA), *Ezgulik* Human Rights Society, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, and the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) said today. Kukanov is one of the worlds longest held political prisoners.

On October 30, 2016, it became public that prison authorities had arbitrarily extended Kukanovs term, allegedly for violating prison rules, beyond his scheduled October 6 release date. The EU and the UN Committee against Torture have repeatedly called for Kukanovs release, and the Uzbek governments persistent refusal to free him is an example of its blatant disregard for its international human rights obligations, the groups said.

Kukanov has been arbitrarily imprisoned for a startling 24 years simply for his peaceful criticism of the government, said [Steve Swerdlow](#), Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. The cruel addition of three more years to his sentence is yet another sign that the new Uzbek government, led by interim president Shvakat Mirziyoyev, is continuing the extremely repressive practices of his predecessor, Islam Karimov.

Kukanov, 72, was the vice chairman of Uzbekistans parliament following independence, and a successful businessman. He also sat on the executive committee of the peaceful opposition *Erk* (Freedom) party.

In June 1992, Kukanov took to the floor of parliament to protest Karimovs announcement of plans to consolidate all security service divisions under his direct command. Kukanov was joined by other members of parliament, including Shovruh Ruzimuradov, a rights activist repeatedly persecuted throughout the 1990s by the Uzbek security services (known by their Russian acronym, SNB). Ruzimuradov died as a result of torture in July 2001, a month after he was arrested.

Security forces arrested Kukanov in June 1992 on charges of economic crimes linked to his alleged financing of *Erk*. SNB officers held him incommunicado without access to counsel for an entire year in the basement of an SNB facility in Tashkent, during which time they tortured him, before finally bringing him to trial. Kukanovs relatives told Human Rights Watch that SNB officers arbitrarily detained two of his sons immediately following his arrest and conducted a number of nighttime raids on his home to instill fear in his family. In 1993, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Kukanov is in prison 64/46 in Navoi. His family has been denied the right to visit him for much of the past 24 years. Kukanovs family had expected his release in May 2013, but then learned that authorities had arbitrarily extended his sentence through October 2016. His sentence will now be extended through 2019. If Kukanov completes his current term and is released, he will have been in prison for 27 years, the longest known case of politically motivated imprisonment in Uzbekistan. His sentence would also exceed the 25-year maximum prison sentence length available under Uzbekistans criminal law (Article 50 of Uzbekistans Criminal Code).

Human Rights Watch has documented Uzbek officials practice of arbitrarily extending the sentences of people imprisoned on political charges. The action is often taken just days before the person is to be released, on bogus grounds such as possessing unauthorized nail clippers, saying prayers, or wearing a white shirt, and may result in years of additional imprisonment.

The eight-year sentence of another imprisoned rights defender, Ganihon Mamatkhanov, was due to end on June 4. But days before Mamatkhanovs release, officials accused him of unspecified violations of prison rules and extended his sentence by three years.

On October 25, prison authorities released a human rights defender, Bobomurod Razzakov, on medical grounds one year prior to the end

of a four-year sentence. But evidence has emerged that Razzakov was seriously ill treated and denied appropriate medical care in prison.

Razzakov's release could not have come a moment too soon for his family and colleagues, said Vasila Inoyatova, chairwoman of *Ezulik* human rights society. But many other journalists, rights defenders, writers, opposition figures, and religious believers are languishing behind bars because of their peaceful activities, and many of them have suffered torture or ill-treatment.

For Constitution Day on December 8, Uzbek authorities regularly announce early prisoner releases, potentially for thousands of prisoners, nominally entitled amnesties. Such early releases generally apply to those convicted of less serious offenses and for specific categories such as teenagers, women, and prisoners over 60. But those imprisoned on politically motivated charges are almost never released. Political prisoners who would otherwise be eligible for release are denied year after year for alleged infractions of internal prison regulations.

Many have high hopes that the Uzbek government, led by interim president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, will follow through on an announced prisoner amnesty planned in connection with Constitution Day holiday, said Nadejda Atayeva, AHRCA. Mirziyoyev should use the Constitution Day releases as a chance to show he's serious about reform and order the immediate release of the numerous other peaceful activists who remain in prison on politically motivated charges.

The Uzbek government should release everyone imprisoned on politically motivated charges, the groups said. They include the human rights activists Azam Farmonov, Mehriniso Hamdamova, Zulhumor Hamdamova, Isroiljon Kholdorov, Gaybullo Jalilov, Nuriddin Jumaniyazov, Matluba Kamilova, Ganikhon Mamatkhanov, Chuyan Mamatkulov, Zafarjon Rahimov, Yuldash Rasulov, Bobomurod Razzokov, Fahriddin Tillaev, and Akzam Turgunov; journalists Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Muhammad Bekjanov, Gayrat Mikhliboev, Yusuf Ruzimuradov, and Dilmurod Saidov; opposition activists Samandar Kukanov, Kudratbek Rasulov, and Rustam Usmanov; and religious figures and other perceived government critics Aramais Avakyan, Ruhiddin Fahriddinov, Nodirbek Yusupov, Dilorom Abdukodirova, Botirbek Eshkuziev, Bahrom Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Erkin Musaev, Davron Tojiev, and Ravshanbek Vafoev.

The European Union is scheduled to hold a human rights dialogue with Uzbekistan on November 8, and should urge interim President Mirziyoyev to uphold Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments and release all those held on politically motivated charges, the groups said.

The EU-Uzbekistan human rights dialogue will have extremely limited utility without clear benchmarks for Uzbekistan's progress and consistent pressure from the highest levels of European governments, the groups said.

The EU should seize the opportunity to re-shape relations with the new Uzbekistani government, making human rights the top priority, said Brigitte Dufour, director of the IPHR. Considering the appalling human rights situation in Uzbekistan, the EU should consistently engage with the new authorities, using every political and human rights dialogue to stress the core principles of the EU and exert true pressure for reform.

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