Uzbekistan denies new opposition party registration

Uzbekistan's Justice Ministry announced on June 21 that it had denied registration to a recently formed opposition party, thereby again dashing hopes that the country might be pursuing political liberalization.

Officials said the Truth and Progress party had failed to collect the 20,000 signatures legally required for registration. Under Uzbek election laws, those endorsements need to be gathered from the country's eight regions and the capital, Tashkent.

"Only 9,873 signatures were collected," the ministry said. "On this basis, the state registration of [Truth and Progress] has not been approved."

Truth and Progress ("Hakikat va Tarakkiyot" in Uzbek) was set up by former university lecturer Khidirnazar Allakulov and has been trying to rally support amid sustained harassment from the authorities.

In February, on a day Allakulov was due to preside over a congress for the party, he was detained by law enforcement officers and immediately transported to the Ferghana Valley city of Andijan for questioning. He was later released. News website Eltuz reported at the time that Allakulov's Tashkent apartment had been besieged by dozens of National Guards troops at around 9 a.m. on February 26.

Truth and Progress has complained that it has struggled to find venues for public gatherings as a result of pressure from the authorities.

In Surkhandaryo, students of Termez State University, of which Allakulov was once a rector, were instructed to disseminate these same criticisms among their peer groups, Ozodlik reported.

Allakulov has a minor public profile in Uzbekistan, but his activities have still somehow managed to trouble the ruling regime. He first announced news of the creation of his Truth and Progress party in June 2020 and said that he intended to run for presidential elections scheduled for this coming October.

Allakulov is an economist by training and served as rector of Termez State University from 2002 to 2004. He was pushed out of that position in 2004 over what is said to have been a run-in with the state security services. He claims that he had been trying to root out the corruption running rampant in the university.

The Justice Ministry is assigning its refusal to register Truth and Progress to purely technical matters, though. It said in its statement that it has received petitions from more than 2,200 citizens requesting that their names be removed from the list supporting the party's registration.

"This was because the aforementioned signatures were collected for various reasons unrelated to the formation of the party," the ministry stated.

As things stand, there are only five parties legally operating in Uzbekistan, and all have seats in the rubber-stamp parliament: President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's Liberal Democratic Party, or UzLiDeP, the conservative Milly Tiklanish, the Social Democratic Party, or Adolat, the People's Democratic Party and the Ecological Party.

Allakulov and his Truth and Progress are not the only ones facing what looks like a coordinated campaign of intimidation.

In January, the well-known singer Jahongir Otajonov announced on Instagram that he aspired to one day lead the country, sparking speculation that he might stand in this year's presidential elections.

Last month, the Erk party announced it was backing Otajonov as its candidate. On May 26, the day that Otajonov was meeting at his home with Erk representatives to approve his candidacy, the premises were mobbed by an aggressive group of around 20 screaming men and women.

"I believe that such attacks cannot be carried out without permission from above," Erk party activist Bakhtiyor Isabekov told Ozodlik.

Although Mirziyoyev is utterly guaranteed to romp to a landslide in October's election, reliance on both formal and informal methods to cow his critics are indicative of the ruling elite's anxieties over the public discontent fueled by the hardships caused in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The World Bank has estimated that Uzbekistan's economy grew by a comparatively modest 1.6 percent in 2020 – a considerable decrease on the 5.8 percent growth seen in 2019 – because of COVID-19-induced lockdowns and disruptions to trade.

"The number of people living in poverty ... has increased during the pandemic to 9 percent of the population (well above the pre-crisis projection of 7.4 percent in 2020), as the pandemic led to job losses, income reductions, and declining remittances. Nearly 1 million people dropped below the poverty line last year," the bank said in its summary of Uzbekistan's economic performance for the year.

With data like that, it is no surprise there is little stomach for naysayers.

eurasianet

Vaccine hesitancy puts India's gains against virus at risk

In Jamsoti, a village tucked deep inside India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, the common refrain among the villagers is that the coronavirus spreads only in cities. The deadly infection, they believe, does not exist in villages.

So when a team of health workers recently approached Manju Kol to get vaccinated, she locked up her house, gathered her children and ran to the nearby forest.

The family hid there for hours and returned only when the workers left in the evening.

"I would rather die than take the vaccine," said Kol.

A deadly surge of coronavirus infections that ripped through India in April and May, killing more than 180,000, has tapered off and new cases have declined. But the relief could be fleeting as a significant amount of the population is still reluctant to get the shots. This has alarmed health experts who say vaccine hesitancy, particularly in India's vast hinterlands, could put the country's fragile gains against COVID-19 at risk.

"Vaccine hesitancy poses a risk to ending the pandemic in India," said retired virologist and pediatrician Dr. T. Jacob John. "The more the virus circulates, the more it can mutate into dangerous new variants that can undermine vaccines."

Delivering vaccines in the world's second-most populous country was always going to be challenging. Even though India did relatively well at the beginning of its mammoth vaccination drive, the campaign hit a snag almost immediately due to shortages and a complicated vaccine policy, exacerbating existing inequalities.

Only less than 5% of India's people are fully immunized. Experts caution that by the end of the year, vaccination rates must go up significantly to protect most Indians from the virus that has so far already killed more than 386,000 people — a figure considered to be a vast undercount.

Starting Monday, every adult in India will be eligible for a shot paid for by the federal government. The new policy, announced last week, ends a complex system of buying and distributing vaccines that overburdened states and led to inequities in how the shots were handed out.

There is still widespread hesitancy fueled by misinformation and mistrust, particularly in rural areas where two-thirds of the country's nearly 1.4 billion population lives.

Health workers face stiff resistance from people who believe that vaccines cause impotence, serious side effects and could even kill. Some simply say they do not need the shots because they're immune to the coronavirus.

Rumors about jabs disrupting the menstruation cycle and reducing fertility have also contributed to fear and skewed the data in favor of men. In almost every Indian state, more men are getting vaccinated than women — and that gap is widening further every day.

Quashing such rumors and conspiracy theories is a tough order for many, particularly in India's tribal-dominated districts that have recorded disproportionately lower vaccine coverage in comparison with other districts, according to official data.

Yogesh Kalkonde, a public health doctor in Gadchiroli, a tribal area in the western state of Maharashtra, said his district was overrun with the belief that the vaccine is more dangerous than the virus.

Some in the area have raised the untrue claim that the shots can cause infertility, Kalkonde said. Others simply question its effectiveness.

"We have to convince people, go door to door, and rely on people who have taken the vaccine to spread the word," he said. "It's an extremely slow process."

There is some pushback. State governments have mounted aggressive awareness campaigns through posters and radio announcements to allay some of the anxiety and confusion. Some local administrations have started giving rides to vaccination centers, especially from remote villages. Volunteers are conducting door-to-door surveys and even small rallies to encourage people to get the jab.

For months, Vibha Singh, a government-appointed nurse, has gone door-to-door in the villages of Uttar Pradesh.

"People tell us to leave or they would beat us," said Singh. "Sometimes they also throw stones and bricks at us."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other leaders have routinely spoken about the need to shun vaccine hesitancy, but health experts say more needs to be done.

"We need to explain it clearly to people, ideally through local trusted networks," said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India. He said state governments should bolster local self-help groups, village councils and ask local religious leaders to step in.

"It requires a conversation, not just top-down messaging," he said.

Dr. Vinod K. Paul, head of the country's COVID-19 task force, acknowledged the immediate need to address the problem but said public participation to dispel rumors and misinformation was important.

"It is the responsibility not only of the government but also the society as a whole to create such an environment in which an unfounded hesitancy is addressed," said Paul.

Virologists and public health experts say eradicating doubts about the vaccine in rural India and inoculating people quickly should be of paramount importance since the majority of Indians live in the hinterlands. Already, urban dwellers are getting the shots much faster. "If they are protected, much of India will be protected," Reddy said of rural areas. "Their vulnerability to a sweeping pandemic is much, much more. So vaccinating them quickly must be a priority."

When a team of health workers last week attempted to vaccinate Panna Lal, a resident of Sikanderpur village in Uttar Pradesh, they were met with an absolute refusal.

Lal even discouraged the rest of his family from getting the jab.

"The vaccine will not protect me," the 56-year-old told the workers. "God has sent me here safely, and he will continue to protect me." AP

Deadly traffic: the fuel drivers caught up in Pakistan-Iran border tensions

Karim Jan* spent the festival of Eid al-Fitr sitting in the scorching May sun as he had spent the previous five days, waiting in a long queue of traffic to get into Iran. Like hundreds of other drivers, Jan came to this desolate town of Mand, on the Pakistan border with Iran, from across Balochistan.

As they waited, some drivers slept in their Iranian pickup trucks , known as Zamyads, while others slept out under the open sky.

Jan had the mandatory token for crossing the border, but did not succeed in getting across to pick up his intended load of illegal fuel. When he reached the security checkpoint, he was told to turn back because the daily limit of 400 Zamyads had been reached.

"I've been transporting fuel from Iran for two decades. I've never faced so many difficulties. My family will die of hunger if I go back this time without a trip to Iran," said Jan, resting under a tree as the temperature rose above 40C (104F).

The business of transporting fuel between Iran and the province of Balochistan has gone on for decades. Each day more than 1,000 Zamyads used to make this journey, selling to 1.5 million people in the Makran region of Balochistan. Iranian fuel also reaches five million people in other regions where Pakistani oil companies have no petrol stations.

The barrels of fuel are driven on dirt tracks through the mountainous terrain of Balochistan. Where they can, drivers take a route to bypass checkpoints along the porous border.

In 2020, Pakistan began fencing the 600 mile (960km) border between Balochistan and Iran to curb cross-border separatist militancy and smuggling. Iran began erecting fencing on its side a few years ago but has not completed the work.

The Pakistan-Iran border crossing at Mand. The drivers get harassed by guards from both countries.

The Pakistan-Iran border crossing at Mand. The drivers get harassed by guards from both countries. Photograph: Shah Meer Baloch There are checkpoints of the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) on the Pakistan side and the Revolutionary Guards Corps on the Iranian side, with sporadic crackdowns by both countries.

Last month, the FC announced that only Zamyads with authorised tokens would be allowed to cross the border with numbers limited to 400 a day. Jan said three years ago more than 1,000 vehicles would cross every day. "But now we hardly have one trip a month," he said.

In May Abdul Razak Dawood, the ministerial adviser on commerce to the Pakistani prime minister, Imran Khan, told the Pakistan senate that an agreement had been signed with Iran to build markets at the border to facilitate local trade.

A government official, who requested anonymity, said: "Authorities in Pakistan think it is an alternative to informal trade, but it is not. [The] fencing has already left thousands of people jobless. If local people don't get alternatives, militancy and the law and order situation will get worse."

He said the latest crackdown started after the prime minister's office wrote to the authorities in Balochistan demanding an end to fuel smuggling because of its impact on the legal Pakistani fuel trade.

"The authorities can't curb it completely," he said. "A fuel crisis would emerge in the region if it was stopped, which would also leave thousands of families starving who depend on the illegal trade."

Mehrab Khan*, a 37-year-old driver, is worried about the new restrictions. "There are many more rules than before. We are stopped at around half a dozen security checkpoints, even after getting the tokens."

If this business stops, we don't know how we would survive ... there is only hunger for us

Abid Rahim*

Relations between Iran and Pakistan are strained; both accuse each other of sheltering militants and of not doing enough to close their bases. In 2019, Iran warned that Pakistan would "pay a heavy price" for allegedly harbouring militants who killed 27 Revolutionary Guards.

See P7

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan talk dams, not rogun

Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid an official visit to Dushanbe on June 10-11. It was Mirziyoyev's second visit to the Tajik capital since his presidency began in 2016. In 2018, Mirziyoyev made a state visit to Dushanbe and hosted a reciprocal visit by Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon the same year.

This second visit in five years by Mirziyoyev beats the record of his predecessor, Islam Karimov, who visited Dushanbe once, in 2000, in his almost three decades of rule.

Mirziyoyev's latest visit to Tajikistan focused on two areas. First, the two countries plan to continue strengthening economic activities, and second, Tashkent without directly touching the Rogun dam issue, proposed an alternative. The Rogun dam has long been a sensitive topic between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and Mirziyoyev's latest visit suggests that despite improved bilateral relations, opposition lingers in Tashkent.

The visit took place as both countries celebrate their strongest trade relations in the past 20 years. Trade turnover grew exponentially and more than doubled since Mirziyoyev came to power, from $197 million in 2016 to $502 million in 2020. This growth is rooted mainly in increased Uzbek exports to Tajikistan—in 2020, $405 million of the $502 million in trade were exports from Uzbekistan and $97 million imports to Uzbekistan. Dominant products among the exports from Uzbekistan were food, knitwear, petroleum products, chemical products, and ferrous and non-ferrous metals.

During Mirziyoyev's visit, the countries agreed to build two hydroelectric power plants on the Tajikistan side of the Zarafshan river. The joint projects are estimated to cost $282 million and $270 million, to be financed by internal funds and outside loans and grants. The power plants will have a capacity of 140 and 135 megawatts, respectively, and are planned to supply electricity to Uzbekistan. The two hydroelectric power plants, in essence, may remove the compelling reasons for Uzbekistan to support the Rogun dam, which Rahmon has long promised would benefit the whole region without lowering the annual supply of water.

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The Rogun dam dampened relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for decades. Uzbekistan's opposition was strong. Despite improving relations between the countries since 2016, under which Uzbekistan's leaders were less loud about opposition to the project, Tashkent also didn't see the benefits of the dam. The last time an Uzbek official said anything regarding the project was when Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov expressed his concerns in 2017 about the Rogun dam having adverse effects on Uzbekistan.

Another less contentious issue between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is the finalization of interstate border issues. No new statement or agreement followed Mirziyoyev's latest meeting with his Tajik counterpart. Both sides are currently involved in border demarcation activities that involve installing physical separators on the border according to the agreement signed in 2018, when Mirziyoyev visited Dushanbe, and the border delimitation plan that was agreed to in 2019.

Thedeplomat

Business-savvy Bangladesh fabric factories take on a greener hue

Zaber and Zubair Fabrics Ltd, a supplier of home textiles to major European retailers H&M and Lidl, is one of a growing band of Bangladeshi garment factories on a mission to clean up their act - and improve their bottom lines by going greener.

The business on the outskirts of Dhaka previously used large amounts of sulphuric acid to remove excess caustic, a chemical that strengthens fabric, from its waste water.

But in 2010, the factory installed two plants that recover from the water 95% of the caustic used to rinse the fabrics made into goods like sheets and pillow covers, saving 6.5 million litres of caustic soda annually as well as sulphuric acid.

The plants also generate hot water as a by-product, which is used in machines to process fabrics at high temperatures, economising on water and electricity.

The plants cost about $2.3 million to set up but have helped the factory save $3.8 million a year through buying fewer chemicals, treating less waste water and lowering energy bills.

"Using green energy, or installing plants that recycle, saves cost in the long run," said Zakir Hossen, sustainability head for the factory which employs 8,000 workers.

reuters