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Uzbekistan: Woman's Sentence Upheld for Sharing Decades-Old Video

Quash Wrongful Conviction; Respect Freedom of Expression
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(Berlin) – A Tashkent regional appeals court on August 21, 2024, upheld a woman's 30-month restricted freedom sentence for alleged anti-constitutional activity in gross violation of her right to freedom of expression, Human Rights Watch said today. Sevara Shaydullaeva, 31, had sent her mother a video clip of Uzbekistan's late President Islam Karimov speaking to Islamists in 1991, which she had downloaded from YouTube.



The Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Independence Square, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

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On April 30, a lower court had found Shaydullaeva guilty of “intentionally storing and distributing materials containing an open call to overthrow the constitutional order of Uzbekistan.” As part of her sentence, she is required to observe a curfew and not travel outside Tashkent region without permission, nor take part in any public events.

“Uzbek authorities should never have put Sevara Shaydullaeva on trial for sharing a video of the former president,” said Mihra Rittmann, senior Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “However disagreeable its contents may be to Uzbek authorities, the speech captured in the 33-year-old video is a matter of historical record.”

Shaydullaeva's conviction rests on the conclusions of the State Committee for Religious Affairs of Uzbekistan, which the government had commissioned to analyze the contents of the video. The appeals court ruling indicates that there was no evidence that Shaydullaeva said or did anything to incite violence or overthrow the Uzbek government.

The video Shaydullaeva shared was filmed in 1991 and shows then-President Karimov addressing a crowd of Islamists in the eastern town of Namangan. Karimov can be seen standing next to Tokhir Yuldash, a man

who several years later became the political leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an armed militant group that the government held responsible for the 1999 bombings in Tashkent as well as armed incursions in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000.

About nine minutes into the 13-minute video, Yuldash passes the microphone to Karimov, who addresses the crowd. He says he will consider their call for Uzbekistan to be governed “according to the rules of Islam,” and that he will ask parliament to consider declaring Uzbekistan an Islamic state.

The views Karimov espouses in the 1991 video stand in stark contrast to the abusive anti-Muslim policies that his administration enacted starting in the late 1990s, which continued until his death in 2016. President Karimov and his administration oversaw a prolonged and ruthless campaign against all Muslims who practiced their faith outside state controls, Human Rights Watch said.

Significant restrictions on freedom of religion and freedom of expression remain in effect under the administration of current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch has long documented the Uzbek government’s misuse of criminal charges to prosecute individuals for exercising their fundamental rights, including freedom of speech and expression. Article 159 of the Criminal Code—“attempting to overthrow the constitutional order of Uzbekistan”—contains provisions so vague and overbroad that they are wholly incompatible with international human rights norms.

Uzbekistan’s partners should urge President Mirziyoyev not to imitate the rights-violating practices of his predecessor and instead to fulfill his own reform promises, including his pledge to make human rights central to reforms.

Consideration of a new draft criminal code has stalled since March 2021.

“Sharing a video documenting events that took place over 30 years ago shouldn’t be a crime,” Rittmann said. “Uzbek authorities should immediately quash Shaydullaeva’s conviction and lift all restrictions on her liberty.”

Region / Country

- Europe/Central Asia
- Uzbekistan

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