

EXTERNAL

31 March 1994

Otanazar ARIPOV ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
Maksud BEKZHAN ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
Salavat UMURZAKOV ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

**Uzbekistan**

Amnesty International is concerned that Otanazar Aripov, Maksud Bekzhan and Salavat Umurzakov, who are associated with the outlawed opposition party Erk (Freedom), are being held in police custody in Uzbekistan. It is not clear what charges have been brought against them, but Amnesty International is concerned by reports that they were arrested for possession of copies of the banned Erk party newspaper and books. Amnesty International believes that these three men may be prisoners of conscience, arrested solely for their non-violent opposition political activities. The organization is seeking further information about the charges against Otanazar Aripov, Maksud Bekzhan and Salavat Umurzakov.

Otanazar Aripov is a professor of physics and a member of the Erk leadership. He was arrested at his home in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, on 3 March following a police search which revealed him to be in possession of the banned Erk newspaper, which is published outside Uzbekistan and distributed clandestinely inside the country. Otanazar Aripov is a former prisoner of conscience, having been arrested in late 1992 and held in detention for around three months in connection with an attempt to organize an alternative parliamentary-style forum in Uzbekistan called Milli Mejlis (National Council). He went on trial with five other defendants in July 1993, and in the following month he was convicted of "conspiracy with the aim of seizing power" and given a suspended prison sentence of three years.

Maksud Bekzhan, aged 33, is a poet and the brother of Erk party leader Muhammad Salih (who lives in exile). He was arrested on 7 March at the airport in the town of Urgench, Khorezm Region, northwest Uzbekistan, reportedly also in connection with possession of the Erk newspaper. He was living in Khorezm Region after having been evicted in February from his apartment in Tashkent, an action interpreted by opposition sources as part of a pattern of harassment against relatives and associates of Muhammad Salih.

Salavat Umurzakov, aged 38, is a journalist and member of Erk. He was arrested at his home in Tashkent on 10 March in similar circumstances to Otanazar Aripov. Like Otanazar Aripov Salavat Umurzakov was a defendant in the Milli Mejlis case, and became a prisoner of conscience when he was taken into detention in May 1993 and held until the end of the Milli Mejlis trial in August. He was also convicted of "conspiracy with the aim of seizing power" and given a suspended three-year prison sentence.

All three men are reported to be detained in the remand cells of the directorate of internal affairs in Tashkent. It has been alleged that they have been denied access to lawyers and to their families.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ERK POLITICAL PARTY**

The Freedom Democratic Party - Erk - was founded in April 1990 following a split in 1989 from the opposition Birlik movement. It was officially registered as Uzbekistan's first opposition political party in September 1991 (the ruling party in Uzbekistan is the People's Democratic Party, the former Communist Party), and party chairman Muhammad Salih contested Uzbekistan's presidential election in December 1991. The party claims 54,000 registered members.

During 1992, Erk took an increasingly radical opposition stance in the face of harassment from the authorities. Muhammad Salih resigned his parliamentary seat in July in protest at not being allowed to address the Supreme Soviet, Uzbekistan's parliament. In August almost all of the party funds were sequestered by the authorities from the party's bank account under the pretext of a tax inspection. Moves began to evict the party from its offices in Tashkent, the capital. Since October 1993 the party has been effectively banned after it did not meet the terms of a decree issued in March requiring all political organizations to re-register by 1 October.

A number of Erk members, especially senior party figures, have been targeted for arrest or other persecution by the authorities. Muhammad Salih has gone into exile after a criminal case was initiated against him in April 1993 in connection with the Milli Mejlis case. In early October 1993 Samat Muratov, who had been elected first secretary of Erk at the party's fourth congress at the end of the previous month, was seized from a street in the town of Karshi by suspected government agents and driven to the town rubbish dump, where he was beaten unconscious.

The official clampdown against Erk has intensified in 1994. On 22 February Nasrullo Saidov, party secretary in Bukhara Region, was arrested and reportedly charged with illegal possession of a hand grenade; sources allege that the hand grenade was planted by police during a search of his home in order to fabricate a criminal charge against him. Similarly, on 3 March writer Mamadali Makhmudov, who is not a member of Erk but is a friend and associate of Muhammad Salih, was arrested and reportedly charged with possession of a pistol which sources also allege was planted by police in his home. Amnesty International is seeking further information about the charges against these men. In late February and early March at least 10 leading Erk activists were held for questioning following raids on their homes in Tashkent, Samarkand and Karshi by police apparently looking for copies of the Erk newspaper. Some of those detained were released shortly afterwards, but three people arrested in Tashkent on 3 March were held in custody until 19 March, and one man arrested in Samarkand on 26 February was not released until around 25 March.