

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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KAZAKHSTAN: PEACEFUL POLITICAL ACTIVIST MARAT ZHYLANBAYEV IMPRISONED FOR PURPORTED EXTREMISM

On 30 November, Kazakhstani activist and well-known athlete, Marat Zhylyanbayev was sentenced to seven years in prison for his peaceful political activities. He must be immediately and unconditionally released.

Marat Zhylyanbayev was wrongly accused of extremism-related crimes, in particular participating in an unregistered political opposition movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK). In 2018, a Kazakhstani court designated the movement an “extremist organization” and banned it, despite there being no credible evidence of the organization engaging in violence or advocating hatred constituting to hostility, violence or discrimination. This designation meant that any activities on behalf of, or in association with, the DCK were criminalized, and many of its supporters have since been persecuted, including the arrest, criminal prosecution and imprisonment of dozens of individuals. In 2023 alone, eight persons have been convicted under extremism-related charges for supporting the DCK, and five more individuals remain under investigation at the time of writing.

Marat Zhylyanbayev is an internationally renowned athlete, and the holder of seven world records, according to the Guinness Book of Records. He is famous for running marathons across some of the world’s biggest and hottest deserts. He is a peaceful protester who has been criticizing the Kazakhstani authorities and publicly supporting calls for peaceful political change in the country. He has been arrested on numerous occasions and penalized for participating in peaceful rallies, under Kazakhstan’s unduly restrictive legislation governing public assemblies. The politically motivated charges under which he has now been sentenced were brought against him on account of his public support for protest rallies proposed by the DCK, as well as donating money to a fellow political activist, Zhanna Sarsenova, to help her candidacy in March 2023 parliamentary elections. For this, Marat Zhylyanbayev was accused of financing extremist activities and “receiving instructions” from foreign-based “extremists” which sought to subvert violently Kazakhstan’s “constitutional order”.

Marat Zhylyanbayev’s conviction must be overturned, and he must be immediately and unconditionally released. The Kazakhstani authorities must end reprisals against their critics, and fully respect Kazakhstan’s obligations under international human rights law.