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Uzbekistan: Death sentence reversed for pop star - a positive step forward

The recent reversal of the death sentence passed last year on a young musician is a significant move forward. The Uzbekistan authorities should now continue further down the road to total abolition by commuting all other pending death sentences, Amnesty International urged today.

On 31 March the Presidium of the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan reversed the death sentence passed last year on a young musician named Arsen Arutyunyan, citing mitigating factors and replacing it with a term of imprisonment. Amnesty International had been campaigning for such a reversal or commutation, and the news was passed to its Deputy Secretary General at a United Nations conference on 14 April. This was confirmed by the Uzbekistan authorities yesterday.

“We greatly welcome this step, and hope that Uzbekistan will live up to its promises to ‘abolish the death penalty in stages’ and commute all pending death sentences,” said Vincent Del Buono, Deputy Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“Of course we have every sympathy with the victims of crime, but we believe the death penalty itself to be a violation of the internationally recognized right -- the right to life.”

Arsen Arutyunyan and Danis Sirazhev, musicians in a well-known Uzbek pop group called “Al- Vakil”, had been sentenced to death on 3 November last year after being convicted of killing a female Uzbek singer, Laylo Aliyeva, the previous year. Amnesty International is seeking to learn whether Danis Sirazhev’s sentence has also been reviewed, and if so what the outcome was.

Unofficial sources had expressed great concern about all stages of the case. The two men alleged that their confessions had been extracted under duress while they were in pre-trial detention, their lawyers reportedly received threats aimed at forcing them to step down from the case, their families were allegedly harassed forcing some to leave the country. Unofficial observers reported that the first appeal hearing at the Supreme Court was unfair.

In 1998 the Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights in Uzbekistan, Sayora Rashidova, informed Amnesty International that Uzbekistan was following “*a policy of abolishing the death penalty by stages*”. Since then Amnesty International has learned of at least 47 death sentences and 15 executions in Uzbekistan. However, as information on the death penalty is regarded as a state secret, the real number of those sentenced to death and executed may

be much higher (at its session in November last year the UN Committee against Torture requested, but did not receive, such statistical information from the government delegation of Uzbekistan).

“The Uzbek authorities should build on the reversal of Arsen Arutyunyan’s death sentence to enter a new stage with regard to their policy on abolition,” Amnesty International urged. “Such steps would be consistent with the worldwide trend towards abolition of the death penalty.”

Specifically, the human rights organization is urging the Uzbek authorities to declare a moratorium on death sentences and executions, commute all pending death sentences to terms of imprisonment, and ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights -- the first international instrument aimed at abolition of the death penalty.

Background

Nearly half the countries of the world have abolished the death penalty in law or practice for all but the most exceptional crimes, such as serious crimes committed during a state of war. Among the Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union, for example, Kyrgyzstan has had a moratorium on executions in place since 1998, and Turkmenistan abolished the death penalty completely in December last year.

Amnesty International believes the death penalty is inherently unjust and arbitrary, however heinous the crime for which it is provided and however scrupulous the procedure by which it is enforced. The risk of error in applying the death penalty is inescapable, yet the penalty is irrevocable. In addition, the death penalty has never been shown to deter crime more effectively than other punishments, and is brutalizing to all those involved in its application.
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