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February 16, 2024

### **Kazakhstan/Uzbekistan: Karakalpak human rights defender Aqylbek Muratbai arrested in Kazakhstan to be deported to Uzbekistan**

On February 15, 2024, Kazakhstani authorities arrested Karakalpak human rights defender, community leader, and advocate **Aqylbek Muratbai** in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The authorities intend to deport him to Uzbekistan, at the request of the Uzbekistani authorities. Given the scope of the current repression against vocal critics of Uzbekistan's policy towards Karakalpakstan, if extradited, Aqylbek Muratbai could face a severe prison sentence.

[Aqylbek Muratbai](#) is a Karakalpak human rights defender, community leader and advocate living in exile in Almaty, Kazakhstan. He has been raising awareness about the human rights violations the Uzbekistani authorities committed against the people of the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan since July 2022, when the peaceful protests calling for independence commenced in Karakalpakstan, and Uzbek authorities engaged military equipment to suppress the protests. Since 2022, the goal of the Uzbekistani authorities has been to suppress the free expression of the people of Karakalpakstan, including the voices of human rights defenders such as Aqylbek Muratbai. He has been working to support the Karakalpak diaspora in Kazakhstan, as well as providing extensive support to the Karakalpak activists and dissidents, who fled Uzbekistan due to persecution from the Uzbekistani authorities.

On February 15, 2024, around 10 PM law enforcement officials in Almaty, Kazakhstan, arrested human rights defender Aqylbek Muratbai, and detained him in the Temporary Detention Ward of the Police Department of the city of Almaty. Law enforcement officers have stated that the detention of the human rights defender follows the Uzbekistani authorities' interstate search warrant issued against Aqylbek Muratbai. The Prosecutor's Office in Kazakhstan will decide if the human rights defender will be extradited to Uzbekistan. Allegedly, the Uzbekistani authorities are charging the human rights defender with the "production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public safety and public order," an offense envisioned by Paragraph 1 of Article 244 of the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan. Given the scope of repressions against the vocal critics of Uzbekistani policy towards Karakalpakstan, if extradited, Aqylbek Muratbai could face a severe prison sentence.

Uzbek authorities have been targeting Karakalpak human rights defenders and activists since July 2022, when protests erupted right after constitutional amendments on

Karakalpakstan's independence that the Uzbekistani government introduced in June 2022. To suppress the protests, [Uzbek authorities reportedly used lethal force and military-grade ammunition](#), which led to at least 27 deaths and more than 200 injuries. Since the mass protests, Uzbek authorities have been targeting human rights defenders and community leaders, who supported the peaceful protests and who continue to bring visibility to the disproportional violence used by the Uzbekistani authorities. In January 2023, the Bukhara Regional Court sentenced human rights defender and lawyer [Dauletmurat Tajimuratov](#), who is a community leader in Karakalpakstan, to sixteen years in prison. The human rights defender was tried along with twenty-two other Karakalpak protesters. In October 2023, the representatives of the Consulate General of Uzbekistan in Almaty already put pressure on Aqylbek Muratbay, asking him not to make public statements about the pressure Uzbekistani authorities put on Karakalpak people.

Front Line Defenders is gravely concerned about the arrest, detention, and intention to extradite Karakalpak human rights defender, community leader and advocate Aqulbek Muratbai at the request of the Uzbekistani authorities. Front Line Defenders believes that Uzbek authorities are targeting the human rights defender and community leader with an interstate search warrant as a result of his human rights work in Karakalpakstan.

### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Kazakhstan:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release human rights defender and Karakalpak community leader Aqulbek Muratbai, refuse his extradition to Uzbekistan, and ensure his physical and psychological integrity;
2. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in Kazakhstan, including those living in exile, are able to carry out their legitimate activities in defense of human rights and can operate freely without fear of restrictions or reprisal.

### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Uzbekistan to:**

1. Immediately cease targeting human rights defender and Karakalpak community leader Aqulbek Muratbai;
2. Refrain from targeting Karakalpak human rights defenders for their peaceful and legitimate human rights work;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Uzbekistan, including those in the territories of the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, can carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations and commitments.