



SILENCED VOICES: Azimjon Askarov

by Cathal Sheerin

Injustice is swift and police brutality the norm in Kyrgyzstan. Azimjon Askarov, a sixty-one-year-old award-winning reporter, has spent his journalistic career writing about this, but he only got his first, personal taste of it in the summer of 2010. On June 15 of that year, Askarov was summoned to his local police station where an investigation into the murder of a police officer was underway. The officer had been stabbed and burned to death during the interethnic violence that was then tearing through southern Kyrgyzstan. Upon arrival at the station, investigating officers pressured Askarov to give evidence against prominent members of the local ethnic Uzbek community, some of whom were suspected of involvement in the murder. Askarov told them, honestly, that he knew nothing. The police responded by beating him with batons and rubber hoses, a common enough experience for anyone arrested in Kyrgyzstan. But this assault went on for seven days, during which



Photo: Front Line Defenders

Azimjon Askarov

time the officers threatened to choke Askarov to death and rape his wife. When the journalist's brother and lawyer attempted to visit him, they too were beaten.

Two days after arriving at the station, Askarov was charged with complicity in the murder of the police officer and various other serious crimes. His trial was speedy, violent, and blatantly unfair: the prosecution presented remarkably little evidence against the journalist, and the police allowed an angry mob to attack Askarov in the courtroom. In September 2010, three months after he was detained, Askarov was convicted of the following crimes: incitement to ethnic hatred, organizing mass disorder, attempting to take a hostage, and complicity in a police officer's murder. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. All of his property, including his family's home, was confiscated. The sentence was upheld at an appeal hearing in November 2010, and also by the Supreme Court in December 2011. Askarov was now a victim of the unjust system that he had spent so many years writing about: how did this happen?

Azimjon Askarov had not always been a journalist; a practical, creative man, he studied art at university and, for the first fifteen years of his adult life, worked as a house painter and decorator. It was only in the mid-nineties, when he could no longer ignore the brutality and torture meted out by the southern Kyrgyz police force, that he began to investigate and write. He quickly made a name for himself exposing police and government corruption; his reporting for the regional news websites *Golos Svobody* (Voice of Freedom) and *Ferghana News* embarrassed local government officials and resulted in several police officers being fired from their posts. When ethnic unrest broke out in June 2010, the local authorities saw an opportunity to avenge themselves. As Askarov later told the Committee to Protect Journalists, "I always obstructed their corrupt work...they hated me."

The interethnic violence of 2010 began as a mass brawl at a casino between members of the (majority) Kyrgyz and (minority) Uzbek ethnic groups. It quickly escalated into widespread looting and acts of savagery in the southern cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad. Between 450 and 500 people were killed, thousands were injured, and hundreds of

thousands displaced. The disorder exposed the anti-Uzbek sentiment that is so prevalent in all areas of Kyrgyzstan's justice system: the majority of those killed, injured or robbed were Uzbeks; the majority of those detained, charged, and convicted in relation to the violence were also Uzbeks. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights observed shortly after the unrest, "Having three quarters of the victims and three quarters of the alleged perpetrators from the same group, during an episode of interethnic violence, simply does not add up."

Kyrgyzstan's police force is comprised almost entirely of ethnic Kyrgyz. Numerous human rights organizations reported that members of the police not only armed Kyrgyz rioters during the violence of 2010, but also that they took an active part in the attacks on ethnic Uzbeks. In 2012, a U.S. State Department report on Kyrgyzstan noted "law enforcement officials' use of arbitrary arrest, mistreatment, torture, arbitrary killings, and extortion against all demographic groups, but particularly against ethnic Uzbeks." As an ethnic Uzbek who exposed corruption in a mainly Kyrgyz police force, Askarov was doubly vulnerable.

While his countrymen fought each other in the streets, Askarov worked almost nonstop, documenting the robberies, arson, and killings that were sweeping the south and spreading toward his village, Bazar-Korgon. On June 13, exhausted, he collapsed into bed at around five a.m. His wife woke him up just after nine a.m., saying that a police officer had just been killed nearby. Askarov grabbed his camera and headed to the chaotic scene of the crime, where hundreds of ethnic Uzbeks had gathered on the highway to block what they thought were Kyrgyz efforts to move armed mobs into the region. Askarov witnessed police officers firing live rounds into the crowd; he took photographs, made extensive notes, and went to the local morgue to identify bodies.

In the days that followed, Askarov visited the local hospital, interviewed the wounded, and shared information with journalists and human rights defenders from Moscow and Bishkek. He wrote that

he had personally seen two shootings of ethnic Uzbeks carried out by the police.

The murder-complicity charge against Askarov was based on testimony from the murdered officer's colleagues, none of whom, bizarrely, testified to having witnessed the crime. According to the police investigation, the victim was killed at around 8:30 a.m. on June 13 during mob violence (when Askarov says he was still in bed). Seven officers, including the Bazar-Korgon police chief (who had seen fellow officers dismissed due to Askarov's reporting), told the court that they had seen the journalist in the crowd beforehand calling on the protesters to "kidnap the police chief and kill the others." However, six other police officers denied these claims.

Shortly after Askarov was convicted, an official investigation commissioned by the government's own human rights ombudsman concluded that the journalist was not at the scene prior to the police officer's murder, and, therefore, that he had played no role in the killing. Despite this finding, Askarov remains in jail where, his family says, he is denied adequate medical attention for the long-term effects of the violence inflicted upon him by the police.

Messages calling for the immediate release of Azimjon Askarov may be sent to:

His Excellency Almazbek Atambayev
President of the Kyrgyz Republic
205, Chui Prospect
720003, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Fax +996 312 638971

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Belarus diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., there is an email: [Embassy of Kyrgyzstan](#).

Cathal Sheerin works for the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International.