

Warnings that opposition leaders are also at “grave risk” of attack.

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The murder of an opposition leader has caused consternation in Tajikistan, and some fear it means other outspoken critics of the government are at risk.

Umarali Quvvatov, leader of the opposition Group 24, was shot dead on March 5 in Istanbul, where he had been living in exile. At least one Tajikistan national has been arrested in connection with the killing.

Although Quvvatov was not seen as a major threat to President Imomali Rahmon’s administration, his death has sparked talk of a government crackdown.

The businessman set up Group 24 in 2012 after fleeing Tajikistan because his assets had been taken over. He claimed that powerful regime figures were behind the seizure.

Last year, his group, which had made public allegations of corruption in government, issued a Facebook call for protests in the capital Dushanbe. The government response was swift – Group 24 was outlawed, police were deployed on the streets, and social media sites were blocked. No demonstration took place.

The Turkish authorities had refused Tajikistan’s request for Quvvatov to be extradited on charges of business malpractice, but they arrested him last December for alleged visa fraud. He was freed last month.

Dushanbe has refrained from official comment on Quvvatov’s death, despite widespread speculation that the killing was politically motivated.

The closest thing to an official reaction came in an interview with a newly-elected member of parliament, Jurakhon Majidov, who used to head the interior ministry’s organised crime department. Majidov told Asia Plus news agency that Quvvatov’s death was a revenge killing by business partners who he had fallen out with him.

“According to information at my disposal, Quvvatov has let down a lot of people in the past. He took over someone’s established business and engaged in fraud,” Majidov said. “There are plenty of people who hold grudges against him.”

Tajikistan’s leading opposition force, the Islamic Rebirth Party (IRP) condemned the killing and called on both Turkish and Tajik authorities to thoroughly investigate the crime.

Amnesty International joined the call for an impartial investigation and warned that Quvvatov’s associates were “at grave risk of further attacks”.

Amnesty’s deputy director for Europe and Central Asia, Denis Krivosheev, said, “We have received reports of death threats and attempted assassinations of dissenters from Tajikistan in foreign countries in recent years, but this is the first actual killing of a Tajikistani political activist. It begs the immediate question – how many more are at risk?”

Political analyst Parviz Mullojanov said that Quvvatov had been a particularly outspoken critic of the authorities, publicly naming his enemies and calling for the overthrow of the government.

“His supporters and many people abroad will therefore blame the authorities for his death, although it’s unlikely that they will ever be able to prove it,” Mullojanov said.

The analyst said the assassination would have a chilling effect on other Tajik political exiles. “Regardless of who might be behind the killing, it will have a negative impact on the opposition-in-exile, which is forced to operate outside the legitimate channels for participating in public life inside Tajikistan because the authorities refuse to register them,” he said. “Leaders of this opposition... will most likely go underground and their criticism will become even harsher.”

Mullojanov predicted that this would prompt the government to take even tougher measures to stifle criticism.

“It will be like a pendulum which swings from side to side until the entire system breaks down. We went through a similar process during the civil war,” Mullojanov said, referring to the 1992-97 conflict which tore the country apart.

“It sets a bad precedent for Tajikistan because this is the biggest political killing in the country, in the last ten years at least,” Mullojanov said.

Quvvatov was murdered four days after a parliamentary election which Rahmon’s ruling People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan won hands down. Neither the IRP nor the Communist Party were awarded any seats. They had two apiece in the last election. (See [Tajik Election Deprives Opposition of Voice](#) .)

Zebo Tajibaeva, director of the Asia-Plus media group, believes that Quvvatov’s murder was meant to send a strong signal to dissidents that the authorities “can go after anyone”.

She does not believe that Quvvatov posed a particular threat to the establishment. “But his regular and quite harsh critical statements were starting to annoy them,” she added.

Another political analyst, who wished to remain anonymous, said that Quvvatov’s killing would instil fear in Tajikistan, where rumours have already begun that his assassination marked the start of a wave of repression against government critics.

“The killing will also have an impact on the media, which even beforehand had become more cautious about covering political developments in the country. This will be particularly visible now, after the parliamentary election,” the analyst said.

On March 12, prosecutors in Dushanbe asked judges for 18-year sentences against two men currently on trial for being members of Group 24. Asia-Plus news agency reports that Firdaus Muhiddinov and Farhod Karimov are accused of “calling for extremist activity” and organising a criminal and extremist group.

An anonymous law-enforcement source told IWPR that while some opposition figures might try to use Quvvatov’s death to renew calls for protest via social media, he doubted this would be effective, because of Quvvatov’s past as a wealthy businessman with links to the presidential family.

“It was because of this reputation that representatives of mainstream opposition parties

such as the IRP and the Social Democratic Party distanced themselves from Quvvatov and his Group 24," the source said.

Mullojanov similarly noted that Quvvatov's past links to the ruling elite had made him a controversial opposition figure.

This view was borne out by a 37-year-old teacher from Dushanbe who gave her name as Manija.

She told IWPR that she had been shocked to hear that Quvvatov was shot dead, but added, "I never liked him. He seemed to have a grudge against people close to the immediate circle around the president's family.... But he used to be one of them, he had a big business, and that that time he was not critical [of government]."

On March 12, Quvvatov's successor as head of Group 24 was named as his cousin Sharofiddin Gadoev, also a businessman. He too is wanted in Tajikistan, on forgery and smuggling charges.

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