

In Kazakhstan, the dangerous struggle to free prisoners from Chinese camps

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As an authoritarian regime and economic ally of China, Kazakhstan remains mute regarding the repression of ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang. Between silence, censorship and pressure, local activists are the only ones fighting for the victims of the Chinese camps.

<https://www.slate.fr/monde/kazakhstan-xinjiang-la-frontiere-des-larmes/dangereuse-lutte-liberer-prisonniers-camps-chinois-frontiere-atajurt-sauver-familles>

When she pushes open the door of Atajurt's office on this cold January afternoon, Kumiskhan Baban is as self-effacing as she is determined. This is already the tenth time she comes here to register a complaint about her younger brother, Qalisbek Baban-Uly, and her sister-in-law, Kausar Giminkhankyzy, both of whom she hasn't heard from in three months. Both have been locked up in Chinese prisons in Xinjiang. One received a five-year sentence for reciting Kazakh poetry, the other an eight-year sentence for studying it.

Beside her, Karima scrupulously takes notes and sometimes asks for a few details about a date or a place, which will enable her to reconstruct the trajectories of the disappeared. She already has heard hundreds of similar stories: each one is like a puzzle that has to be patiently pieced together, by trying to obtain information from the victims' acquaintances or from the Kazakh and Chinese authorities, often stingy with information.

A silent repression

Since the start of China's violent crackdown on Xinjiang's ethnic minorities that began in 2014, a deathly silence has gradually spread across the region: everywhere, the fear of speaking out, of revealing something, of being heard by the wrong person has won over the locals.

It was only by chance, while a friend was visiting her in Kazakhstan, that Kumiskhan learned of her brother's arrest in December 2019. Her parents were relieved to hear it at last, as they had been ordered not to talk about it, or were afraid, or... This is how terror sets in: by nibbling away at all certainty.

"Repression also works through intimidation. Many Xinjiang residents said: "They can take any one of us away, at any time, but they can't arrest everyone"... Well that's true, but they can arrest a large part of the population, and wanted to show they had the capacity to do so. The idea is to break all structures of resistance to the government, which explains why the regime has arrested and sentenced many intellectuals to long prison terms: they were proposing an alternative to Chinese modernity", comments Rune Steenberg, an anthropologist specialist of Xinjiang.

Breaking this silence is rarely easy for the direct victims of repression or their relatives: in doing so, they all expose themselves to reprisals from the Chinese regime. If they can't arrest the son, they'll arrest the mother, and if the sister who's gone abroad makes too much noise, they'll visit her uncle back home. In this context, testifying publicly is more of a dangerous gamble. Those who do so openly hope to put pressure on the authorities and get things moving... at the risk of a backlash.

Campaigning, in spite of everything

More and more victims have taken this risk, as the scale of China's repression has been revealed. In Kazakhstan, there is one name that all survivors know: Serikzhan Bilash. This activist, co-founder of the human rights association Atajurt, was one of the first to draw public attention to the suspicions of crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Chinese regime in Xinjiang.

On his initiative, Atajurt launched a YouTube channel, posting video testimonies of people demanding the release of their loved ones, and then of the first survivors of the camps. Viewed by tens of thousands of people, these videos were also circulated to the Chinese authorities, who were quick to react: little by little, the phones of the disappeared began to ring again, visits to parlour were granted and, in the best of cases, releases were anticipated.

But these concessions implied a counter-attack. Having become the *bête noire* of both the Chinese and Kazakh governments, Serikzhan Bilash was arrested and forced into exile in 2019, while Atajurt offices were raided by the Kazakh authorities, resulting in the disappearance of thousands of archives. The association then split: some of the activists agreed to collaborate with the KNB (the Kazakh intelligence services) to obtain legal status as an organization and pursue their activities without meddling in domestic politics, while others refused to pledge allegiance to the Kazakh government and founded a dissident branch, which has since been trying to establish itself as an opposition party: Atajurt Partiasy.

A grassroots struggle

For Karima Abdrakhmanova, it is impossible to conceive of a struggle against the Chinese regime that would be uncoupled from a struggle against the practices of the Kazakh regime: *“If we do nothing to change the political system in our country, there's no point in fighting to help the people of Xinjiang, she asserts. These two states are dictatorships, and they walk hand in hand because they have a strong economic partnership. Our own leaders don't protect us, and are incapable of saving the Kazakhs on the other side of the border.”*

At the age of 60, this former English teacher is devoting all her energy to track down Kazakhs trapped in Xinjiang, and fight against the political repression raging in Kazakhstan. From morning to night, Karima juggles her two phones and criss-crosses the country by bus, cab, train or plane, meeting victims of Chinese repression and trying to provide them with assistance. *“Xinjiang has become an open-air prison. At Atajurt, we are freedom warriors”*, she says.

Karima never misses an opportunity to raise awareness of these issues among the people she meets: on a sleeper train, in the back of a cab, the discussion quickly leads to hopes for a democratic future, and to solidarity between peoples – Kazakhstan has experienced several waves of migration, and is made up of many ethnic minorities. Karima is convinced that it is civil society that could bring about change, as she works tirelessly to bring victims into the public sphere, and to ensure that their torturers are held accountable, with the aim of ending impunity.

David, Goliath and Goliath

With around twenty effective activists and some 500 members spread across the country, Atajurt Partiasy seems tiny compared to the two Kazakh and Chinese giants; and yet, they helped saving several thousand families through their actions – it is estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 Kazakhs from Xinjiang have been able to come to Kazakhstan – which are enough to make the two regimes tense up.

“Sometimes, the police summon some of our members for questioning, or the KNB sends us spies to try to obtain information. Other times, we notice that we're being watched, especially on symbolic dates like CCP celebrations, or

January 5 [which marks the anniversary of the 2022 revolt in Kazakhstan, ed.] *They post police cars or unmarked vehicles in front of our homes, with officers dressed head to toe in black. They're afraid we're going to protest,*” Karima laughs.

But at the end of the day, when the alarm clock goes off and it's time to go to bed, Karima is tired of this constant tension, to which is added the heaviness of testimonies whose brutality has become daily, but never habitual. *“I feel like I'm under a microscope all the time”*, she sighs. Tomorrow, she must continue: *“I can't stop doing it... It's a responsibility we have towards all the victims.”*

Kazakhstan's double game

While Kazakhstan makes it easier for Xinjiang survivors who manage to leave China to obtain residence permits or Kazakh nationality, no official statement has been made denouncing the repressive policies in the region, which affect many Kazakhs with Chinese nationality. Financially dependent on China, the country can't afford too much frontal criticism.

“Kazakhstan doesn't officially recognize the repression, but allows people of Kazakh ethnicity not to provide a criminal record extract when they cross the border, and offers them repatriate status, which then opens all the doors for them to settle here,” explains Aina Shormanbaeva, a lawyer versed in the defense of Xinjiang survivors and their families. However, she points to the widespread corruption of the Kazakh immigration services, which makes the procedures much longer and much more costly for those who find themselves powerless in the face of Kafkaesque administrations that manage the border like a ping-pong tournament.

But for those who are not ethnic Kazakhs or who have had to cross the border illegally, these procedures become a real obstacle course, with no guarantee of success, and with the threat of further deportation to China. *“In theory, there is a legal status for political refugees, but no one has ever obtained it, assures Shormanbaeva. These people can be registered as asylum seekers, but it's still extremely difficult, and they end up leaving Kazakhstan quite quickly. For the Uyghurs, the oppression never ends.”*

Getting out of the camps

Since 2017, through the International Legal Initiative (ILI) of which she is president, Shormanbaeva has begun registering and sending complaints to the Kazakh Foreign Ministry to plead for the repatriation of people held in Xinjiang against their will. In all, over 250 cases have been defended, almost half of which have been successful, sometimes after years of waiting and numerous reminders.

Most of the time, it is by appealing to international law, and in particular Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on separated families, ratified by China, that the plaintiffs can hope to win their case: *“The idea is not to position ourselves on a political terrain, but to make it a humanitarian issue by mobilizing the rights of families and the rights of women. It worked in the negotiations, probably because it was easier to present the case from this angle to the Chinese authorities, arguing that the families should be reunited”*, explains Shormanbaeva.

While this method may work for repatriating people detained in re-education camps, subjected to forced labor or deprived of their passports, it proves ineffective for those who have been sentenced to prison terms by the Chinese state. *“In this situation, complaints are lodged, but the Kazakh authorities can do nothing: it is impossible for them to appeal against Chinese court decisions. What's more, these people have had no access to lawyers, and no right to a fair trial. We don't know how to help them,”* deplores Shormanbaeva.

While ILI advocates recognition of the crimes against humanity committed by the Chinese regime in the Xinjiang region – which, according to Shormanbaeva, would make it possible to encompass the accusations of genocide made by part of the scientific community, and extend them to the other ethnic minorities affected – Kazakhstan's inertia and the international community's ponderous declarations have so far allowed these practices to continue.

“Our states are very good at collaborating in repression. You could say that China has succeeded in importing its repression into Central Asia: surveillance, human rights violations... The methods are the same”, says Shormanbaeva. In her view, only a universal international criminal court could put an end to this impunity. But in the current legal vacuum, it is still local activists and the media pressure brought to bear by the international press that are enabling the release of victims of Chinese repression on a case-by-case basis.