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## Diary

Ben Mauk

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In August 2018 I was in Zharkent, a market town in Kazakhstan near the Chinese border, reporting on the extradition trial of an asylum seeker named Sayragul Sauytbay. She claimed she had been forced to teach Mandarin in a political re-education camp near her home town in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China's largest and most ethnically diverse administrative territory. It was rumoured that such camps were proliferating across Xinjiang as the Chinese government sought not only to quell separatist violence but to force assimilation on the region's non-Han population. A majority of the region's inhabitants belong to Turkic and predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, including more than 12 million Uyghurs and about 1.5 million Kazakhs. The rest of the population is Han Chinese, many of whom arrived in the region between the 1950s and the 1970s, as part of Beijing's effort to sedentaryise the country's western frontier. Satellite photographs suggested that a huge number of prison-like structures, which were described in government tenders as 're-education' facilities, had been erected since 2016. Leaked internal documents showed a large increase in arrests in the region and more jobs for guards, teachers and police officers. Visitors and journalists reported roadblocks and checkpoints, the collecting of biometric data, forced family separation, prohibitions against religious and cultural practices, the destruction of mosques and cemeteries, and the imposition of Big Brothers and Sisters – Han Chinese party members – into Muslim family homes.

'We are trying to re-educate most of them, trying to turn them into normal persons [who] can go back to normal life,' the Chinese ambassador to the US said last November. Adrian Zenz, who by examining government documents has uncovered much about the logistics of Xinjiang's 'Strike Hard' campaign, as well as the thinking behind it, believes that the internment drive has swept up as many as 1.5 million people, one in six of the adult Turkic Muslims in the region, in some cases emptying entire villages. They have been detained for such crimes as having a beard or wearing a headscarf, praying, or contacting relatives in any of 22 countries (Kazakhstan is one) that are deemed 'dangerous'.

An ethnic Kazakh, Sauytbay had escaped into Kazakhstan, following her husband and two children, in April 2018, but was arrested a few weeks later. At her trial, she described the camp in Zhaosu County as a 'prison in the mountains', and asked not to be sent back to China, where she said she would be killed.

I knew about the trial through the efforts of a group called Atajurt, cofounded by Serikzhan Bilash, a Chinese-born ethnic Kazakh, one of more than 200,000 oralmandar, or 'returnees', now living in Kazakhstan. Atajurt was set up in 2017 with the purpose of defending the human rights of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. Sauytbay's

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husband, an oralman who, like Bilash, was now a Kazakh citizen, had at first been reluctant to publicise her case, but Bilash persuaded him that foreign attention was her best hope. ‘We’ve never had a trial like this, open to the public, to foreign journalists,’ he told me on the steps outside the court. ‘This will show the world what is happening in Xinjiang.’

That afternoon, the judge gave Sauytbay a six-month suspended sentence, an astonishingly lenient conclusion to a trial most people I’d talked to believed would end in her extradition. Bilash was encouraged. ‘We should work closely with the media,’ he said to me later that day. ‘For a year and a half, we have been treating this issue politely, but our main enemy is the Chinese government. Their goal is to silence us.’

Before Sauytbay’s trial, Chinese officials had largely denied the existence of the camps in Xinjiang. In response to a CNN report in February 2018, China’s consul general in Kazakhstan said: ‘We do not have such an idea in China.’ A month later, the governor of Xinjiang, Shohrat Zakir, said the claim that there were concentration and re-education camps in Xinjiang was ‘extraordinarily absurd’. But after Sauytbay’s testimony appeared in news reports – along with other statements gathered by Atajurt volunteers, and evidence in the form of satellite photographs and documents – officials scrambled to adjust their line. ‘Xinjiang conducts vocational skills education and training according to law,’ Zakir said. ‘The purpose is to fundamentally eliminate the environment and soil that breeds terrorism and religious extremism.’ Some citizens guilty of ‘minor offences’, officials stated, were being sent to vocational training centres to receive ‘job training’.

After the trial, Bilash worked with Amnesty International on a briefing that describes Xinjiang as an ‘open-air prison’, citing dozens of witness accounts of surveillance, detention and forced indoctrination. Other resources began to appear online, such as the Xinjiang Victims Database, a crowdsourced website that currently contains entries on more than five thousand cases of detention, imprisonment or disappearance in the region. Eugene Bunin, who set up the site, credits Atajurt with making the situation in Xinjiang a global concern. Soon after the trial Atajurt opened new offices in Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan, and in the capital, then called Astana, since renamed Nur-Sultan. Its volunteer force expanded to include speakers of Chinese, Kazakh, English, Turkish, Uyghur and Arabic. It organised press conferences and helped victims write petitions to the foreign ministry and the UN. Thousands of video testimonies were uploaded to Atajurt’s YouTube channel. For several months, Atajurt was the Central Asian hub for all human rights activity in Xinjiang, a partisan and occasionally fractious group working largely alone in a region of repressive autocracies. And they got results. There are dozens of cases on Bunin’s site where external pressure – media reports and grassroots activism, often originating with testimony collected by Atajurt – seems to have secured a victim’s release.

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After the trial, Bilash tried to register Atajurt as an NGO in Kazakhstan. The Ministry of Justice refused to register the organisation on four separate occasions. Instead, Bilash received warnings that Atajurt was illegal, and in February a court ordered him to pay a fine of about \$700. Volunteers began to feel they were being watched. On 9 March, four strange men appeared in Atajurt’s Almaty offices. They refused to talk to Atajurt staff. The volunteers started recording the men on their phones. After ordering them to stop – it wasn’t clear on whose authority – the men left the building. The volunteers filmed their getaway.

Bilash was rattled. Instead of going home that night, he checked himself into a hotel. He told only a few trusted Atajurt volunteers where he’d be. The next morning, Bilash

didn't answer his phone. His colleagues went to the hotel and found his room empty. The chain lock on the door was broken and there were bloodstains beside the door and in the bathroom. The hotel employees couldn't tell them anything. The volunteers uploaded a video of the room to Facebook and YouTube, demanding an explanation from whichever government – Kazakhstan or China – had abducted him.

Not long after the video appeared, Bilash's wife, Leila Adilzhan, received a phone call from an unknown number. It was Bilash. He wasn't dead or in China, but 600 miles away, in Astana. Mysterious authorities – almost certainly members of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee, the branch of state intelligence formed after the KGB was disbanded in the early 1990s – had bundled him onto a plane in the middle of the night. 'He was calling from a policeman's phone,' she told me. 'He said he was in Astana, that he had been arrested. I was so shocked, I couldn't answer. I was asking how, why, when.'

He was charged with 'inciting ethnic discord'. Police cited a meeting he had attended in February with Uyghur, Kazakh and other activists. He had encouraged them to fight back against Chinese propaganda: 'Jihad today is not taking up a gun and fighting in Syria,' he'd said at the meeting, which had been filmed. 'Jihad is information and propaganda.' When the Kazakh police released a video announcing Bilash's arrest, they included a heavily edited montage of clips that showed him uttering a single word: 'jihad'. State TV news programmes ran the same clip.

Bilash was at first denied legal representation and made to record a confession, which his lawyer, Aiman Umarova, later managed to have dismissed from evidence. Perhaps because of the attention paid to the case by the international media, Bilash was released from jail after three days and placed under house arrest in Astana. Umarova, who also represented Sauytbay, endured her own harassment campaign: there were attempts to discredit her; one night, someone sneaked into her garden and killed the family dog.

I returned to Kazakhstan in April, a month after Bilash was spirited away from Almaty. The country's charismatic authoritarian president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, had just announced his retirement after thirty years in power. Under him, Kazakhstan had become the richest country in Central Asia, thanks to its oil and gas reserves. In recent years, Nazarbayev has brokered billions of dollars' worth of Chinese investments and bilateral trade agreements. He appointed an interim president, the parliamentary speaker, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, and announced that there would be early elections in June. No true opposition parties are permitted to run in elections; most of my friends in Almaty said they wouldn't participate or would submit a blank ballot in protest. I thought of a variation on the old Soviet joke: 'They pretend to run for office, we pretend to vote.'

Like other countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan is heavily dependent on Chinese loans, China-funded infrastructure projects and Chinese trade agreements. It sees itself as the 'buckle' in China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, an infrastructure and trade project with components in more than sixty countries. Not everyone is happy about the growth of Chinese influence. In 2016, there were nationwide protests – the largest in Kazakhstan's history – against a proposed law which would have allowed foreign citizens to rent agricultural land. Many saw Bilash's arrest as a signal that the government intended to discourage any expression of anti-Chinese feeling ahead of the elections. There were other signs. Sauytbay's application for asylum was turned down (she and her family were eventually granted asylum in Sweden). In March, China thanked Kazakhstan for supporting its 'deradicalisation programme' in Xinjiang. After Bilash's arrest, the authorities raided Atajurt's offices and many of the group's volunteers melted away. Things were quiet during my visit. Bilash remained under house arrest in the capital, now renamed Nur-Sultan. It had, a friend joked, been one of the few remaining objects in the whole country not yet named in honour of the departing president.

On election day, hundreds of protesters were met with brutal police violence. Smartphone videos show police and military officers attacking peaceful onlookers. Images of people crying in distress as soldiers hauled them away spread across Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, until the government temporarily shut them down. Tokayev won in a landslide.

On 15 August, after nearly five months under house arrest, Bilash was sent back to Almaty to stand trial. Umarova received a summons late that afternoon, calling her to court the following morning at ten. Just the day before, she told me, she had discovered

the brake cables on her car had been cut. When she and Bilash arrived at the courthouse, she was forcibly separated from him. Bilash was given a choice: abandon his activism against China, or be sent to prison for seven years. The trial, he was assured, would end in conviction; indeed, 99 per cent of criminal trials in Kazakhstan do – the rate hasn't changed since the Soviet era.

By the time Umarova managed to find him – in the men's bathroom, surrounded by officials – Bilash had agreed to a plea bargain. She refused to sign it: 'My client was innocent, first of all, and I saw how they reached the plea bargain, by putting my client under pressure.' Another lawyer had to be found, after which Bilash was set free. Kazakhstan, Umarova said, had 'bent over backwards for China'. 'I had to end my activism against China,' Bilash told a group of supporters that night. 'It was that or seven years in jail. I had no choice.' He hasn't spoken out since. At Sauytbay's trial, he had anticipated a deluge of extradition cases as more ethnic Kazakhs escaped from Xinjiang into Kazakhstan. 'We have to sort out the problem or we will have dozens and dozens of trials like this,' he told me. But Kazakhstan's government has found another way to sort out the problem: crushing political dissent, working quietly with China to lock down the border, and silencing Xinjiang's critics through a campaign of intimidation and violence.

At the end of July, Xinjiang's vice chairman claimed that 90 per cent of those sent to the re-education centres had now 'returned to society'. Most independent experts are sceptical, citing evidence that the camps are still in operation – some may even be expanding. Social media platforms are still full of posts asking for information about missing Uyghur relatives. Among those detainees who are released, many are sent straight from the camps to factories where they are forced to work under what the Chinese government itself describes as 'concentrated, closed-off, military-style management'. Workers who have escaped describe it as a form of serfdom enforced by the constant threat of reimprisonment. One woman I met through Atajurt spent eight months in a camp taking political indoctrination classes before being transferred to a factory in Yili that makes gloves for export to the US and Europe. She was forced to sign a year-long contract: 'If you stopped working, they sent you back to the camp,' she told me. Her wages came out to about \$30 a month. 'So you see, it's like slavery.' It isn't clear how many people have been coerced into such work. Unless pressure is maintained by Atajurt's remaining volunteers or other human rights groups, first-hand accounts of conditions in the camps and factories will vanish.

In May, before the elections, a reporter at a press conference in Nur-Sultan managed to rattle Zhang Xiao, the Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan, by asking whether it was true that Kazakhs in Xinjiang were being told not to visit Kazakhstan, and that any who did were being put in detention centres on their return.

'This is disinformation, I can say this unambiguously,' Zhang said. 'Where did you get such information? Can you disclose this information, this secret?'

'Two hundred students ...' the journalist began.

'That's disinformation too,' Zhang interrupted.

'So the situation there is fine?' another reporter asked.

'The situation is quite stable and normal. The measures being taken in Xinjiang are only for the fight against terrorism, radicalism and extremism.'

Without identifying Atajurt by name, a third reporter began to ask about the press conferences held by Bilash's organisation, at which Kazakh and Uyghur victims and their families testified to the use of arbitrary detention, torture, forced labour and mass surveillance. Again, Zhang cut the question off. 'I just want to state here that all of this is disinformation. Have I answered everything?' Without waiting for a reply, he stormed off.

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