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Kazakhstan's Longest-Serving Political Prisoner Dies

Aron Atabek died weeks after being released in failing health.

By Joanna Lillis for Eurasianet

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Aron Atabek **currenttime.tv**

A poet who was until recently Kazakhstan's longest-serving political prisoner has died less than two months after he was set free. He had spent 15 years behind bars for a crime he always insisted he had not committed.

Aron Atabek died on Nov. 24 in a hospital in his hometown of Almaty after his heart failed, his sister told Radio Azattyk.

Atabek had been diagnosed with Covid-19 and pneumonia and hospitalized soon after his release on Oct. 1.

He was already extremely sick when the authorities released him early with the remaining

three years of his sentence commuted to "restricted freedom," entailing parole-like restrictions, on what they described as compassionate grounds because of his ailing health.

A photograph of him looking pale and emaciated, circulated by a rights campaigner who visited him in prison in summer, had caused a furor on social media. Some 2,500 people signed a petition addressed to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appealing for Atabek's freedom as concerns mounted over the health of the 68-year-old dissident.

Atabek had been serving an 18-year sentence on charges of organizing unrest in 2006 over home demolitions in the Almaty suburb of Shanyrak, during which a police officer was burned to death.

He had always refused to ask for parole because he insisted on his innocence. In 2012 he rejected the offer of a pardon that required him to admit guilt. He even objected to his early release, demanding that his conviction be overturned instead.

Relatives had launched a campaign to raise funds for medical treatment abroad for the writer, who was reported to be suffering from a heart condition and diabetes.

Atabek's supporters said his health deteriorated drastically because he was denied access to appropriate medical care and subjected to violence and mistreatment in prison. He once spent two years in solitary confinement after smuggling out of prison an article critical of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the then-president.

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Officials reject claims of mistreatment and deny any political motivation in this and other cases.

Activists in Kazakhstan expressed their disgust over his death.

"This national figure who suffered under tyrannical rule for 15 years [in prison] has died in a hospital bed," commented Ryspek Sarsenbay on a Facebook post on Atabek's death by human rights campaigner Bakytzhan Toregozhina. "He passed away without having seen or met his people or seeing happy days even for a short time. Rest in peace."

Sarsenbay is a fierce critic of the authorities, whose politician brother Altynbek Sarsenbayev was killed in a political assassination in 2006.

"Nazarbayev is to blame for the poet's death," tweeted civil society campaigner Assem Zhapisheva.

She also wondered why Atabek had been "kept in prison until there was nothing left of him and then let out to die."

According to a tally by rights campaigners, there are still currently over a dozen political prisoners in Kazakhstan serving or facing jail terms.

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