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Kazakhstan: Ablyazov-linked trial kicks off amid scuffles

Police denied relatives and reporters access to the courthouse, sparking angry reactions.

By: Joanna Lillis

A courthouse in Kazakhstan's business capital, Almaty, was a picture of chaos and rowdy protestations on June 14 as hearings began in the case of entrepreneur Iskander Yerimbetov, who is facing corruption charges his supporters say are political motivated.

Yerimbetov denies charges of laundering money on behalf of Mukhtar Ablyazov, a France-based former banker and a determined foe of President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Yerimbetov's family says the fact that his sister, Bota Jardemalie, is one of Ablyazov's lawyers suggests the entire affair may be an exercise in getting at the opposition figure. His father has claimed that the entrepreneur is "a hostage in the war on the opposition" and was arrested to persuade Jardemalie, who has been granted political asylum in Belgium, to return to Kazakhstan to testify against Ablyazov.

There were scenes of indignation outside the Almaty court when several dozen supporters, including two of Yerimbetov's sons, and journalists were initially prevented from entering on the grounds that the courtroom was too small. Following angry exchanges as people attempted to push through the metal detector, access was granted to journalists and some members of the public.

There were more tussles with police inside the courtroom, after the judge retired to consider legal motions.

During the hiatus, Yerimbetov began making a statement, declaiming his innocence and outlining claims of torture in detention. The authorities have already rejected those claims. When police entered the enclosed cage serving as a dock to thwart Yerimbetov, tussles broke out between officers and enraged supporters, who began chanting "freedom to Iskander" and "no to torture."

Calm was soon restored and the hearing resumed after the judge returned.

Ahead of the trial, Jared Genser, a Washington-based lawyer hired by Yerimbetov's family, gave a news conference in which he described his client as a "political prisoner" and the case materials as "repetitive junk." The authorities deny any political motivation to the trial. Genser also outlined a campaign to get top officials in Kazakhstan sanctioned in the United States under the Global Magnitsky Act, which allows sanctions against foreign officials implicated in human rights abuses.

The day's events highlighted tensions over the trial in Kazakhstan, where any link to Ablyazov, no matter how tenuous, can be toxic.

The authorities have banned his Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan movement, a mainly virtual operation whose tactics include calling on supporters to stage street protests. Those who heeded the call last month were arrested. Among the detainees were Yerimbetov's elderly parents. Ablyazov has called for more demonstrations on June 23 as part of his plans to deliver regime change in Kazakhstan, as he told Eurasianet last month.