

# SILENCING WOMEN:

STATE-LED POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN KYRGYZSTAN



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# Silencing Women: State-led Political Violence in Kyrgyzstan

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Cover design: Tatyana Zelenskaya  
Layout: Emil Akhmatbekov

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## Executive summary

Women make up about half of the population in Kyrgyzstan, yet remain significantly underrepresented in political life at all levels of government. While the country has formally committed to gender equality through international conventions and national strategies, these commitments have not translated into meaningful protection or empowerment for women in political and civic life. Cultural expectations and entrenched male dominance discourage many women from seeking office or participating in public affairs.

In recent years, the Kyrgyz government has increasingly emerged as the key actor enabling and orchestrating the repression of politically active women. Through smear campaigns, surveillance, online and physical threats, arbitrary arrests, and politically motivated prosecutions, the state has systematically used its legal and institutional apparatus to silence dissent and deter women from public engagement.

This paper examines the main tools and mechanisms employed by the Kyrgyz state to suppress women's participation in public life, drawing on selected cases of activists, human rights defenders, politicians, and journalists who have faced retaliation for their work.

## Concepts and definitions

As with many complex concepts, political violence can be understood from multiple perspectives depending on the context and fields of study. The World Health Organization (2002) defines it as the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political objectives. This includes physical and psychological acts, as well as the deprivation of basic needs and human rights, all aimed at harming or intimidating populations. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) adopts an event-based typology, classifying political violence according to the level of organization: organized violence, including battles, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians and mob violence, understood as spontaneous or loosely organized public unrest (Kishi, Pavlik, & Jones, 2020). Besley and Persson (2010) distinguish between two forms based on the actors involved: two-sided violence, namely civil wars between governments and insurgent groups, and one-sided violence (repression), where the state engages in repression against “opponents considered undesirable by the incumbent government”.

As women's political participation has increased in recent decades, scholars have begun to examine the specific tools and tactics used against women in politics, how their experiences differ from those of men, and how political violence is shaped by gender (e.g. Sen, Vallejo, and Walsh 2019, Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2016, 2019; Krook, 2017). To better conceptualize this phenomenon, Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) propose the term “gendered political violence”, which may be gendered in its motives, forms, and/or impact. Women in politics can be targeted just because they are women to preserve “gendered hierarchies of political power” and maintain “politics as a male domain”. However, they may also be targeted not because of their gender, but because they represent political opposition that authorities seek to silence or punish. So, violence becomes gendered when it either has gender as a motive, takes different forms depending on the victim's gender or when its consequences, interpretations and meanings differ for women and men. If none of these elements is present, the violence is considered political but not gendered.



In *Violence Against Women in Politics*, Krook (2020) emphasizes that “violence against women in politics is a distinct phenomenon involving a broad range of harms to attack and undermine women as political actors”. Studies indicate that even indirect exposure to violence can serve as a form of gatekeeping, deterring women from entering politics and activism. Barboni and Wheatley (2018) argue that women in politics are disproportionately affected by online violence, or what Esposito (2021) more precisely terms “digital technology-facilitated violence” (DTF). Drawing on research from Australia, Esposito (2021) demonstrates that media attacks on former Prime Minister Julia Gillard discouraged other women from pursuing political office.

In Kyrgyzstan, a similar effort was undertaken through the study *Violence Against Women in Politics in the Kyrgyz Republic*, which sought to document not only physical threats but also psychological, economic, sexual, and media-based forms of violence, and to propose strategies for prevention and support. The authors note that violence against women in politics occurs both during the electoral process and while they serve in representative or executive roles, at both national and local levels, and that it undermines women’s political engagement and deters their participation in public life. It particularly focused on hate speech in traditional media and social media platforms targeting women politicians. Survey results showed that the vast majority of female respondents (92%) were members of local councils, with only 1% from the Supreme Council and the remaining 7% unaffiliated with parliament. Women were found to be targeted across multiple fronts, including physical assault, economic exclusion, sexual harassment, psychological pressure, and damaging media portrayals. Victims frequently experienced stress, fear, diminished capacity to perform their duties, and self-censorship, even though many (about 80%) remained determined to stay engaged (Kochorbayeva, Prigoda, Islanbekova, & Tyulegenov, 2022).

For the purposes of this paper, political violence is defined as violence used to achieve political objectives. It may be perpetrated by both state and non-state actors and directed against a variety of targets, including civilians. Political violence is considered gendered when its motives, forms, or impacts are shaped by gender.

## Scope of analysis

Rather than focusing on violence perpetrated by non-state actors, this paper examines state-led political violence and the institutional mechanisms used to deter women from political participation and activism. The analysis draws primarily on media reports, public statements by authorities, and publications by international and national human rights organizations. Selected case studies are used to illustrate recurring patterns, tools and tactics employed by the state, with attention, where applicable, to their gendered implications.

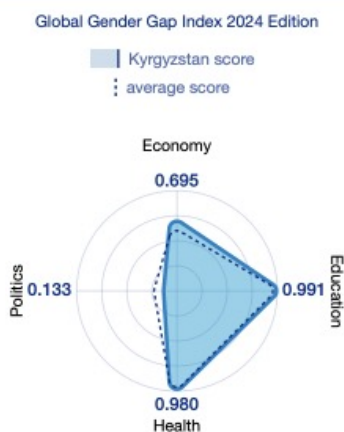
The focus on women in this paper does not imply that men or other groups are unaffected by state repression in Kyrgyzstan. The paper is an effort to document women’s stories and analyze how gender might shape the forms, mechanisms, and impacts of political violence. A gender-sensitive approach allows for a deeper understanding of how structural inequalities and traditional norms intersect with state repression. Given the already limited and fragile nature of women’s participation in political and civic life, such repression can have a disproportionate impact, further deterring participation, silencing dissent, and reinforcing the perception that politics and activism are unsafe or inaccessible for women.

## Country context

Kyrgyzstan, a Central Asian country of approximately 7 million people, has formally committed to gender equality through both international and national legal instruments. At the international level, the country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, affirming its obligations to uphold women's rights and eliminate gender-based discrimination (United Nations, 1979). Domestically, these commitments are reflected in several documents, including the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, and two laws addressing domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan has adopted the National Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality until 2030, which outlines long-term goals and priorities for promoting gender equity across all sectors of society (JK KR, 2020).

However, gender disparities persist in education and political representation due to socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and weak policy enforcement. According to the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index (WEF), Kyrgyzstan ranks 90th out of 146 countries, marking a decline from its 2023 ranking (84th place) and 2022 ranking (86th place) (Equal Future Eurasia, n.d.).

Until January 2025, Article 303 of the Labour Code included a list of professions prohibited for women (Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial, 2025). For example, women were not allowed to drive intercity buses with a capacity of more than 14 passengers, work as loaders handling raw materials or fuel, or operate certain types of specialized vehicles as machinists. They were also barred from tasks such as manual wood chopping and digging (CABAR.asia, 2021). Current limitations apply to pregnant and breastfeeding women only, in line with health and safety considerations. The repeal of Article 303 marks progress, yet systemic barriers remain deeply embedded in practice.



Source: World Economic Forum, 2024

<sup>1</sup> The Law on the Protection and Prevention of Domestic Violence of 27 April 2017 (No. 63) and the Decree on the Procedure for Implementing Protection and Prevention of Domestic Violence of 1 August 2019 (Nº 390).

Political representation remains a critical issue, as illustrated by the graph above. In 2005, there were no women in the Kyrgyz Parliament. Although a 30% gender quota for parliamentary elections was introduced in 2019, actual female representation remains below this target. Currently, women hold only 22% of parliamentary seats (20 out of 90), and even fewer leadership positions at the local level (Kaktus.media, 2024). Of the 15 ministers in government, only one is a woman, Dogdurkul Kendirbaeva, Minister of Education and Science (Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic, n.d.). There are no women among the regional governors (president's plenipotentiaries), nor are there female district heads (akims).

Such low numbers of women in political leadership can be explained by a combination of cultural and practical barriers. Female candidates are often discouraged from running due to cultural expectations and a male-dominated political landscape. Traditional norms regard politics as outside the appropriate domain for women. Instead, women are expected to prioritize family roles over political careers, leading to self-censorship and fewer leadership aspirations. Women often lack the mentorship and networking opportunities needed to advance in politics.

There have been signs of progress. The 2024 elections for city and local councils marked a historic milestone in women's political participation. Women now hold 29% of city council seats (290 out of 993) and 42% of rural (ayil) council seats (2,248 out of 5,391). This represents a significant increase compared to previous years — women held just 9% of these positions in 2019, rising to 38% in 2021 (CEC KR, 2024). The “State Program of the Kyrgyz Republic on Supporting Women's Leadership until 2030” and its accompanying Action Plan for 2024–2027 are currently being implemented to promote gender equality and enhance women's participation in political life (MJ KR, 2016).

Despite having had Central Asia's first female president,<sup>2</sup> resistance to women's political participation remains widespread across government and society. One increasingly recognized barrier to women's participation in politics and activism is the hostile environment they often face. Women's political engagement continues to be met with opposition, often articulated through statements of prejudice and gender stereotypes, including from the highest political platforms.

In 2021, Member of Parliament Amankul Toktomambetov publicly proposed reducing the parliamentary gender quota for women. “The draft initially stipulated that every third seat would be allocated to a woman, but now it will be every fourth”, he stated. He went on to mock the idea of gender parity by saying, “If every second MP is a woman, it will turn into the Kyz-Burak ensemble”, referencing a popular female folk group in order to belittle women's political participation (24.kg, 2021).

In December 2024, the Speaker of Parliament further challenged institutional support for gender equality by suggesting the abolition of gender quotas altogether. During a parliamentary session on a draft bill that sought to legally define “women's entrepreneurship”, he remarked: “We talk about gender and always grant equal rights to women, but when election time comes, gender doesn't seem

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2 Roza Otunbaeva, the first female Central Asian head of state served as the President of the Kyrgyz Republic from 7 April 2010 until 1 December 2011. She was not elected to her short term by popular vote, but rather in a popular referendum that also passed a new mixed-style presidential-parliamentary constitution that was unique for countries of former Soviet Central Asia.

to apply. We should reconsider the quota system for elections. They are equal to us in every area, but during elections, they suddenly become weak and ask for quotas” (Zharbulova, 2024). Such statements reflect a broader pattern of resistance to women’s political inclusion, where gender equality is endorsed on paper but undermined in practice, especially during electoral processes.

At the same time, women parliamentarians emphasize the importance of female representation in politics. They argue that women are often more engaged in addressing key social issues. For instance, Nilufar Alimzhanova, a deputy of the 7th convocation of the Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament), highlights that women legislators frequently lead discussions on education, healthcare, domestic violence, and the rights of women and children, areas that are usually overlooked by their male counterparts (Kaktus.media, 2024). This is particularly evident in the non-governmental sector, where women play a crucial role (24.kg, 2008) (and lead up to 80% in gender-related organizations) (Umetalieva, Aytkulova, & Solomatova, n.d.). NGOs frequently take on responsibilities where the state fails, especially in the areas of social protection and essential service delivery. Nearly all crisis centers and shelters currently operating in the country function without any governmental support.

## The State as a Perpetrator

The erosion of women’s rights in the country is evidenced by rising levels of gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>3</sup> and a worrying level of acceptance of such abuse by both society and the government. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security ranked Kyrgyzstan as the most dangerous country in Central Asia for women for two consecutive years (2023 and 2024) in its Women, Peace, and Security Index.

The state can play a dual role with regard to violence against women in politics: not only by failing to protect (inaction), but also by actively perpetrating harm through intimidation, harassment, or punitive measures. A notable example is the March 8, 2020 demonstration in Bishkek, where a group of masked men attacked participants of a peaceful women’s rights march. Instead of intervening to protect the victims, police detained the demonstrators and forcibly took them to a police station. In some cases, the children of detained women were left unattended in the street, as authorities refused to allow the women to bring their children with them (Front Line Defenders, 2020). This specific incident involved both non-state and state actors committing political violence. It can also be characterized as gendered political violence: women were targeted specifically because of their gender, with the underlying motive rooted in reinforcing traditional gender norms and discouraging their participation in public and political life.

Among the instruments used to deter women from public life are state-led smear campaigns to discredit activists, often followed by targeted threats. These threats take various forms, such as verbal harassment, surveillance, or physical attacks carried out by unidentified actors, but are intentionally ignored or implicitly tolerated by the state. Women receive threats online and by phone, are followed by individuals or unmarked vehicles, and in some cases, are attacked in their

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3 According to the Ministry of Interior of the Kyrgyz Republic a total of 17,316 domestic violence cases were registered in 2024. Between January and April 2025, 6,536 cases were reported—a 36% increase compared to the same period in the previous year.

homes, with such incidents often staged to resemble burglaries. In many of these cases, no legal action is taken: perpetrators are not investigated, charges are not filed, and victims' accounts are dismissed or ignored. According to Front Line Defenders, while no laws explicitly target the work of human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan, the legal system fails to protect them due to widespread corruption, the routine use of ill-treatment and torture with impunity, and the lack of independent oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Falsified criminal cases have become a key tool used by the state to push women out of public and political life. In particular, authorities increasingly rely on Articles 278, 327 and 330 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, relating to incitement of unrest and violent seizure of power and use state-arranged linguistic examinations of public statements or social media posts to justify investigations and arrests.

## Selected cases

The majority of cases documented in this section span the period from 2020 to 2025. While political violence against women in Kyrgyzstan is not a new phenomenon, the scale and intensity of state-led repression have notably increased in recent years. This period has been marked by a surge in restrictive legislation, intensified pressure on civil society, and the growing use of politically motivated prosecutions. In April 2021, the Kyrgyz Republic adopted a new Constitution returning from parliamentarian to a presidential model of governance. The Freedom House's Nations in Transit report has classified Kyrgyzstan as a consolidated authoritarian regime for the last eight years, with its score steadily declining (from 16 out of 100 in 2020 to 11 out of 100 in 2024). While internet access has improved in recent years, internet freedom has significantly declined. According to the Freedom on the Net report, Kyrgyzstan's score dropped from 56/100 in 2020 to 48/100 in 2024 (Freedom House). Similarly, the 2025 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders ranked Kyrgyzstan 144th out of 180 countries — a decline of 24 positions (RSF, 2025).

Activists, journalists, and politicians have faced harsher penalties, longer prison sentences, and expanded forms of retaliation. The Law “On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information”, adopted in August 2021 in violation of the country's constitution and parliamentary procedures, has added further pressure on independent media outlets. It allows any citizen to request the removal of content they claim to be defamatory and grants authorities the power to arbitrarily and extrajudicially block or delete information deemed “false” or “inaccurate”. If media outlets fail to comply within 24 hours, they risk being blocked (RSF, 2021). Since its adoption, the law has been widely used to disrupt the work of independent media.

After some years in the making, the Law on Amendments to the Law “On Non-Commercial Organizations”, also known as the Law on Foreign Representatives was finally signed in April 2024 (MJ KR, 2024). It sets additional requirements for non-governmental organizations, particularly those receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activities. The law has been widely criticized by local and international human rights organizations and donors for its restrictive provisions and its potential to suppress civil society. In a similar move, a new media law was adopted in July 2025. Although revised multiple times during the drafting process, the final



version still imposes significantly stricter regulations on media outlets (Makanbai Kyzy, 2025). New legislation, coupled with ongoing verbal and institutional attacks on activists, has put the work of NGOs and independent media outlets at risk of being completely shut down. The legal proceedings and banning of Kloop Media<sup>4</sup> and April TV,<sup>5</sup> as well as the crackdown on the Temirov Live investigative outlet,<sup>6</sup> are three of the most striking examples among many.

Founded in 2007, **Kloop Media** is an independent outlet known for its investigative reporting on high-level corruption and abuse of power, gender-based violence, and for training young journalists in Central Asia. It gained national attention during the 2010 April Revolution and has since remained one of the few critical voices in Kyrgyzstan's media landscape (Kloop.kg, n.d.). For its reporting Kloop faced increased government pressure, including criminal investigations, arrests, surveillance, and lawsuits. On September 12, 2023, Kyrgyz authorities shut down the Kloop Media Public Foundation. Recently at least a dozen current and former Kloop journalists were subjected to arrests. Some of them remain in detention. On July 17, 2025 seven Kloop journalists had their bank accounts blocked. While many Kloop journalists have since relocated abroad due to persecution and arrests, a significant portion of these being female reporters, the outlet continues to operate in exile, maintaining its commitment to transparency and accountability. State-led persecution strongly affected their families, since several of the Kloop staff who relocated, went abroad with their children and spouses.

**Aidai Irgebayeva**, Kloop Media producer/editor and **Anna Kapushenko**, Editor-in-chief along with other colleagues and their families had to flee from repressions and relocated to the European Union. Both journalists focused on women's rights and anti-corruption reporting.

As part of a repression campaign against investigative media, in December 2021-January 2022 a man later identified as an agent of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) developed a relationship with Temirov LIVE journalist **Aigul** (name changed to ensure her safety and to protect her privacy) and filmed the night they spent together with several hidden cameras installed inside the room. Aigul therein became a victim of sextortion - a form of blackmail wherein a person or persons threaten to share intimate images of their victim online unless she acquiesces to their demands. In this case, other SCNS agents who were working with the man who seduced Aigul later showed her the intimate videos, threatening to publish them if she failed to disclose the details of forthcoming Temirov Live media investigations.

The SCNS agents initially took Aigul out of town to the village of Koi-Tash, where they submitted her to psychological torture from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. in a rented house, threatening to show the

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4 In 2023, Kyrgyz authorities initiated legal proceedings to shut down Kloop Media, one of the country's last remaining independent investigative outlets. The case is widely viewed as politically motivated retaliation for Kloop's reporting on high-level corruption and human rights abuses.

5 As reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists in July 2025, a Kyrgyz court ordered the shutdown of April TV along with its broadcasting and social-media operations, claiming its "negative and destructive" coverage undermined the government's authority. The move follows a politically charged lawsuit filed in April accusing the outlet of provoking mass unrest, widely seen as part of an ongoing campaign to silence independent media in the country.

6 Temirov Live is a Kyrgyzstan-based investigative media outlet founded in 2020 by journalist Bolot Temirov and primarily operating on YouTube. The outlet has faced increasing state pressure and persecution in response to its reporting on high-level corruption involving President Japarov's relatives. In 2022, founder Bolot Temirov was arrested, stripped of citizenship, and deported to Russia, while his colleagues faced surveillance, harassment, and criminal charges.

videos to her parents both career civil servants, warning her that this would bring them shame and emotional distress. After coercing Aigul into signing a statement of cooperation, the agents took her home.

A week after this incident, on January 20, 2022, Temirov LIVE published an investigation into alleged corruption involving relatives of Kyrgyzstan's SCNS chief, Kamchybek Tashiev. Two days after the report's release, journalist Bolot Temirov and akyn Bolot Nazarov were arrested. Soon after, an intimate video of Aigul appeared on social media, accompanied by a false voiceover claiming that she had provided sexual services to the Temirov LIVE's foreign donors in exchange for funding (Current Time, 2022).

Another journalist and activist forced into exile is **Leila Saralaeva**. She fled Kyrgyzstan in 2024, following a search of the 24.kg newsroom and amid a wave of arrests targeting reporters linked to Temirov LIVE. Saralaeva, who did not work for either outlet, learned from acquaintances that her name had appeared on an arrest list (Current Time Asia, 2025). She was directly targeted by President Sadyr Japarov, who, in a 2025 interview with the Kabar news agency dismissed her as an “unreliable” and “self-proclaimed journalist” after she publicly questioned his past political affiliations (24.kg, 2025). A veteran with more than 30 years in journalism, Saralaeva had previously been subjected to smear campaigns and online harassment, including cyberbullying and trolling by coordinated bot networks. Despite being forced to leave the country, she continues her investigative work in exile as the editor of New Faces media outlet (Current Time Asia, 2025).

**Mahabat Tazhibek kyzy** is a human rights defender and investigative journalist known for reporting on high-level corruption involving senior government officials in Kyrgyzstan. She is the director of Temirov Live and the affiliated project Ayt Ayt Dese and also the wife of Temirov Live founder, Bolot Temirov, who was arrested and deported to Russia in 2022 after his Kyrgyz passport was annulled.

On October 10, 2024, the Leninskiy District Court in Bishkek sentenced Tazhibek kyzy to six years in prison for her investigative reporting. The Court found her guilty of “calls for mass civil unrest”, criminal offences under Part 2 of Article 41 and Part 3 of Article 278 of Kyrgyzstan's Criminal Code. Her colleagues, Aktilek Kaparov and Ayke Beyshekeeva, received three years of probation for the same charges (Front Line Defenders, n.d.). Once again, the court disregarded provisions for sentence deferral, even though Tazhibek kyzy was the sole caregiver of her 12-year-old son (IPHR, 2025).

Concerns have also been raised regarding Tazhibek kyzy's physical safety while in detention. In April 2024, allegations emerged that she had been physically assaulted during pre-trial detention, although prosecutors dismissed the claims. Reports also indicated that she faced ongoing harassment and death threats from another inmate. In February 2025, representatives of the National Center for the Prevention of Torture (NCPT)<sup>7</sup> visited her in detention to check the reports. Her case has drawn significant international attention. Front Line Defenders called the sentence “a

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<sup>7</sup> In yet another concerning move, the Kyrgyz Parliament voted to abolish NCPT and transferred its mandate to the Ombuds Institution under the new Constitutional Law “On Akyikatchy (the Ombudsperson) of the Kyrgyz Republic” on June 25, 2025.

retaliation for the defenders' legitimate and peaceful human rights work" (Front Line Defenders, n.d.). A joint statement by Human Rights Watch (HRW), the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Front Line Defenders (FLD), and the International Federation for Human Rights (IFHR) called on the Kyrgyz authorities to take immediate steps to ensure her safety (Linn, 2025).

Civil activist and independent journalist **Kanyshay Mamyrkulova** was detained on March 20, 2025, on charges under the articles "Call for mass riots" and "Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious or interregional hostility (discord)" articles 278 and 330 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic. Investigators allege that she spread false information regarding the Kyrgyz-Tajik demarcation deal, which they claim could potentially destabilize the situation in the country. Police said that the criminal case was initiated based on the forensic linguistic examination confirming the calls for violence in her posts. In April the court also seized her house, which, according to human rights activist Gulshaiyr Abdirasulova, is the only home she owns (Tukueva, 2025). Her persecution is directly connected to her posts that were critical of the current government; President Sadyr Japarov even publicly referred to her as a "barking dog" (Kloop.kg, 2025). The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) and IPHR have called on Kyrgyz authorities to release Mamyrkulova and to drop the criminal charges against her. While the prosecution requested a sentence of up to eight and a half years in prison, Mamyrkulova was sentenced to four years of probation on July 3. She was released from custody but remains under onerous restrictions, including a nightly curfew from 22:00 to 06:00. She is prohibited from traveling abroad, must report to the authorities twice a month, notify them of any changes in residence, and participate in probation-related activities. Notably, she is also subject to limitations on what she can write or publish online, including on social media. Any violation of these conditions may result in the revocation of her probation and her return to custody (RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, 2025).

Authorities have demonstrated no leniency or consideration in cases involving women activists, effectively punishing them for merely doing their jobs. These harsh sentences for non-violent offenses not only lack proportionality but also inflict direct harm on their children, separating mothers from their families and violating basic principles of justice and child welfare.

The following cases concern the persecution of activists, politicians, and former MPs under what is known as the Kempir-Abad case. Before detailing the individual incidents, a brief overview is necessary.

The Kempir-Abad case centered on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border demarcation agreement, under which Kyrgyzstan transferred control of the Kempir-Abad water reservoir located inside Kyrgyz territory to Uzbekistan. On November 17, 2022, the Kyrgyz parliament ratified the deal, sparking a heated public debate due to the lack of transparency and public engagement. The decision was made unilaterally by the government and lawmakers were denied access to the full text of the agreement, a decision that SCNS head Kamchybek Tashiev justified on national security grounds. After MP and former Foreign Minister Chyngyz Aidarbekov criticized the process and highlighted the lack of information provided to parliamentarians, he was removed from his position as chair of the Committee on International Affairs, Defense, Security, and Migration (Imanaliyeva, 2022).

On October 22, 2022, a support committee for the Kempir-Abad reservoir was formed, bringing together activists, politicians, and members of parliament. The very next day, mass arrests began.

By the end of October, 26 individuals had been detained on charges of preparing to incite mass unrest (Dzhumashova, 2023). When several detainees began a hunger strike and their health conditions worsened, the mothers of those detained appealed to President Japarov for clemency. His response was notably dismissive and gendered, implying that the women involved should have been better controlled by their families. He questioned why their mothers had not taught them to remain silent, avoid slander, or refrain from political activism: “Make them keep their mouths shut. Why didn’t they teach these women and girls wisdom before it was too late?” (Pannier, 2022). Such remarks reflect a deeply rooted gender bias, suggesting that adult women are not autonomous political actors but subjects who should be controlled within the private sphere of the family. Coming from the country’s president, they not only reinforce harmful stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes embedded in traditional culture but also legitimize and enable the use of repressive mechanisms against women by other state and non-state actors.

### **Several activists were targeted as part of the Kempir-Abad case:**

***Rita Karasartova*** is a prominent human rights defender and governance expert at the Institute of Civic Analysis, a think tank that monitors judicial appointments and trials in Kyrgyzstan and provides independent legal expertise on local governance.

Karasartova was arrested on October 23, 2022, one day after a meeting of the Committee for the Protection of the Kempir-Abad reservoir was held, along with a dozen activists, bloggers, and politicians. She was held in custody longer than the other women human rights defenders in the case and was only transferred under house arrest on June 23, 2023.

On 14 April 2025, law enforcement raided her home in Bishkek, and she was charged in a new criminal case under Article 278(3) of the Criminal Code for allegedly inciting unrest immediately after she published a letter written by the activist Tilekmat Kubaibergen uulu (Kurenov). Kurenov was detained and forcibly transported to Kyrgyzstan from the United Arab Emirates in the spring of 2025 (Freedom for Eurasia, 2025). The charges leveled against Karasartova carry a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison.

Her case was marked by a series of procedural violations. Her legal team was repeatedly denied access to key case materials, and multiple complaints have been filed against the investigator overseeing the case. Karasartova’s pre-trial detention has been extended multiple times, and over the past two and a half years, she has spent more than 10 months in detention. Most recently, a court hearing scheduled for June 19 was postponed to June 27, and her detention was extended yet again.

On July 25, 2025, Rita Karasartova’s daughter published on social media her mother’s letter from prison in which Karasartova confirmed she had received her indictment. Contrary to earlier speculation, the indictment made no mention of an alleged connection with Tilekmat Kurenov and lacked any specific accusations. Karasartova argued in the letter that her imprisonment was a consequence of her advocacy for democratic reform, stating that “the very idea that power must change hands terrifies those who hold it”. Her case has been classified as secret, and court proceedings were postponed indefinitely following a change of judge (Kloop, 2025).



Human rights defenders and civil society actors view her prosecution as politically motivated, and “in retaliation for her peaceful human rights work and civic participation” (Amnesty International, 2025).

**Klara Sooronkulova**, former judge of the Constitutional Court of Kyrgyzstan, human rights defender, is the chairwoman of the NGO School of Law and the Committee to Protect Political Prisoners. She was charged with “inciting mass unrest” under Article 278 of the Criminal Code for peacefully opposing the government’s decision to transfer the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. Despite the baseless nature of the charges, she and other women HRDs spent several months in pre-trial detention before being placed under house arrest. She was also among other activists who went on a hunger strike while in detention. On 14 June, 2024, the Pervomaiskiy District Court acquitted Sooronkulova and all other defendants. However, the Prosecutor’s Office appealed the verdict on 12 July 2024, leaving the threat of renewed prosecution hanging over her, reinforcing a climate of persistent legal uncertainty and intimidation (Front Line Defenders, n.d.).

While in detention, Sooronkulova learned of a new case opened against her for a Facebook post she shared a year earlier as part of a solidarity campaign *#камасаңар баарыбызды камагыла* (*#ArrestUsAll*) supporting another activist. The post was subjected to state-commissioned linguistic expertise, which concluded that it contained calls for the violent overthrow of the government (Article 327). Her legal team challenged the findings and demanded an impartial review of the full post and highlighting the selective enforcement of the law, as many others had shared the same message without facing prosecution (Vesti.kg, 2023).

**Orozaiym Narmatova**, is a former member of the Kyrgyz Parliament (VII convocation), entrepreneur, and founder of several civic and media initiatives, including the youth organization Zhashtar Koomu (Youth Community). Initially a vocal supporter of Sadyr Japarov, she later joined the opposition party Butun Kyrgyzstan and was elected to parliament in 2021. However, her mandate was revoked later that year by the Central Election Commission and Referendums (CEC), based on a challenge from SCNS and the Ministry of Education, which questioned the legitimacy of her academic credentials (Orlova, 2022).

Narmatova became widely known for her strong presence on social media and vocal criticism of the presidential administration. In September 2021, she was detained on charges of inciting interregional discord and calling for the violent overthrow of the government under Article 313(1) of the Criminal Code. Authorities alleged that while residing in Russia, she regularly participated in conferences and public events where she “consistently voiced unfounded criticism of the country’s political leadership with the aim of increasing protest sentiment among both labor migrants and citizens in Kyrgyzstan”, and that her publications “discredited the activities of the Kyrgyz authorities” (Kaktus.media, 2021). In October 2022, she was arrested again in connection with the Kempir-Abad case after publicly opposing the transfer of the reservoir to Uzbekistan. She spent three months in pre-trial detention, during which her health significantly deteriorated. At one court hearing, she collapsed and struck her head against the metal cage in the courtroom. Although she was briefly hospitalized, the court denied a request from her lawyer for medical supervision or house arrest, and she was returned to jail (Imanaliyeva, 2022). She was eventually released on health grounds in December 2022. Her case was separated from the Kempir-Abad case and suspended. In September 2024, Narmatova acquired 50% shares of Serep media holding

(Kaktus.media, 2024). Serep media<sup>8</sup> publishes local and international news in the Kyrgyz language, avoiding criticism of the authorities and quoting the positions of the president and the head of SCNS on various political, economic, and social issues.

**Perizat Suranova** is a public and political figure and longtime activist. She was a member of the Zamandash party from 2007 and served on its political council between 2011 and 2020. She is a member of the Women's Democratic Network of Kyrgyzstan. In 2022, she joined the Committee for the Protection of the Kempir-Abad reservoir alongside other activists, deputies, and politicians. Like others, she was charged with preparing to incite mass unrest. On December 13, 2022 during a court hearing to review extension of pre-trial detention measures, she announced a hunger strike, joining 18 other activists in protest. Despite repeated emergency calls related to her health condition, penitentiary authorities consistently denied her hospitalization (Dzhumashova, 2022).

**Asya Sasykbaeva**, is the 73-year-old founder and ex-director of the International Human Rights Center "Interbilim" and an ex-deputy speaker of parliament. In October 2022, Sasykbaeva became a member of the Committee for the Protection of the Kempir-Abad reservoir. She was arrested on October 23, 2022 and charged with organizing mass unrest. After six months in detention, on April 12, 2023 she was transferred from detention facility SIZO-1 under house arrest due to deteriorating health caused by deplorable and life-threatening prison conditions. She remains a defendant in the Kempir-Abad criminal case.

**Gulnara Jurabayeva (Dzhurabayeva)** is an ex-Project Coordinator of International Human Rights Center "Interbilim" and an ex-Deputy Chairman of the Central Election Commission. She was arrested on October 23, 2022 and charged with organizing mass unrest as part of the Kempir-Abad criminal case. She was transferred from detention facility SIZO-1 under house arrest on April 12, 2023 after spending six months in detention.

Prosecutors demanded 20-year prison sentences with confiscation of property for all defendants. In June 2024, in a surprise decision, all the remaining defendants in the Kempir-Abad case were acquitted by the Pervomaisky District Court of Bishkek. The Prosecutor General's Office filed an appeal to the Bishkek city court. The case is pending before the court.

The authorities dealt with bloggers, political activists, and feminist activists in a similar manner, leveraging all available institutional tools to exert pressure and silence dissent.

**Kanykey Aranova** is a Kyrgyz blogger and activist who was among those detained in connection with protests against the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border agreement in October 2022 after accusing SCNS head Kamchybek Tashiev, of hiding the details of the negotiations from the public in a video posted on social media. She was charged with "defamation and mocking government officials" (OCCRP & Temirov Live, 2024) and was sentenced to 30 hours of community service. In February 2024 she was again arrested, this time in Moscow, and transferred to Kyrgyzstan as part of a new case that was apparently entirely fabricated with the evidence leaning on posts from a fake Facebook account impersonating Aranova while that publishing provocative statements. The security services

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8 For more information on Serep Media see: <https://serep.kg/kabarlar/>

requested an analysis of the posts only after the account was renamed “Kanykei Aranova”, while the account was initially registered under the name “Адина Жума” (Adina Zhuma) (OCCRP & Temirov Live, 2024). She was initially fined 120,000 soms (approx. USD 1,350) and released on the condition that she not leave the city (RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 2024). However, the Prosecutor’s Office appealed this decision to the Bishkek City Court, which subsequently sentenced her to a prison term.

Even though Article 87 of the Criminal Procedure Code allows for the postponement of sentences for convicted individuals with children under the age of 14, Aranova, a single mother with an 11-year-old daughter, was sentenced to 3.5 years in prison with no deferral. She was convicted under Article 330 (incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious interregional enmity (discord) and Article 327 (public calls for violent seizure of power) of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 2025). Her daughter was handed over to Aranova’s relatives.

**Zarina Torokulova** is an economist by profession, who worked for several years as deputy director of the Sherali Sydykov Sports College in Bishkek. Torokulova was arrested by the SCNS on September 11, 2023. The activist was charged with making ‘provocative’ statements on social media and a case was opened under article 278 “Calls for mass riots” of the Criminal Code. According to prosecutors, Torokulova shared two posts from the Facebook account “Umai Aruu”, one titled “Japarov Mafia”, and the other “Let’s organize an online rally.” She was sentenced to five years in prison for these Facebook posts (Kloop.kg, 2024). On April 9, 2025 Torokulova was pardoned by President Japarov and freed after nearly two years in prison.

**Kanykey Aranova** and **Zarina Torokulova** were subjected to pressure and persecution during their imprisonment. They were determined as “persistent violators of prison regulations” and transferred to a stricter penal regime, entailing harsh restrictions that included limited visitation rights, fewer outdoor breaks, and no eligibility for parole or transfer to lower-security facilities. According to human rights defender Gulshayr Abdirasulova, they were sent to “a prison within a prison”, a facility typically reserved for individuals convicted of terrorism and extremism, even though neither activist had incited violence or committed acts causing harm to others (RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 2025).

In December 2024, long-time activist and human rights defender, **Aziza Abdirasulova**, founder of the “Kylym Shamy” Foundation<sup>9</sup>, was forced to flee Kyrgyzstan due to threats and ongoing surveillance. Abdirasulova had been among the human rights defenders who supported Sadyr Japarov and his allies when they were persecuted by previous administrations, providing them with legal advice and access to lawyers (Azattyk, 2025).

On 24 December, 2024, during the People’s Kurultay, President Japarov spoke about the “Kylym Shamy” Foundation, accusing it of acting in the interest of unnamed foreign actors: “They manage to report back to their masters, making up statistics. And their masters think they’re doing a good job. In reality, they spread false information, look for the negative, and baselessly insult the honor

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<sup>9</sup> The Center for the Protection of Human Rights “Kylym Shamy” is a non-profit organization operating since 2003 in the field of human rights and freedoms. See also: <http://ksh.kg/?lang=en>

and dignity of others”. Abdirasulova had been among those arrested during the Kempir-Abad protest in November 2022. At the time, she was accused of resisting a police officer and fined 3,000 KGS (approx USD 35). However, this decision was later overturned by a higher court. It has become commonplace for relatives of activists to be targeted as a means of intimidation. In August 2023, two men broke into Abdirasulova’s house and forcibly attempted to seize her husband’s phone. She publicly accused the security forces of organizing the attack and called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the SCNS, and the Prosecutor General’s Office to cease all unlawful actions against her family (Mediazona, 2024). In response to Abdirasulova’s statements and her fleeing the country, President Japarov publicly dismissed her claims of persecution, stating that Abdirasulova would not be targeted if she returned to Kyrgyzstan. Japarov also reaffirmed the country’s official commitment to human rights and freedom of expression (24.kg, 2024). In 2022, her daughter **Gulshayir Abdirasulova**, who chairs the “Kylym Shamy” Foundation in her mother’s absence, reported that “Kylym Shamy” had been subjected to an impromptu state tax inspection. Authorities requested information from the organization concerning Aziza Abdirasulova and lawyers affiliated with the foundation. Gulshayir described the inspection as part of a broader pattern of increasing pressure on Kyrgyzstan’s NGO sector (RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 2022).

**Batmakan Zholbolduyeva** a blogger from Kyrgyzstan’s Batken region, runs a YouTube channel with more than 50,000 subscribers, where she posts videos inspecting sanitary conditions in local shops and eateries and checking the expiration dates of products.<sup>10</sup> On February 5, 2022, she became embroiled in a conflict with Alikhan Uraimov, Chief of Staff of the Batken regional administration, after he objected to her attending a district meeting covering government actions related to communities affected by the April 2021 border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uraimov claimed that Zholbolduyeva was “not a media representative”. During this altercation, Uraimov struck her in the face. Although Zholbolduyeva documented her injuries and filed a complaint, Uraimov submitted a counterclaim accusing her of assault. A forensic medical exam concluded Uraimov sustained “minor injuries causing short-term health impairment”, leading to a criminal case being opened against Zholbolduyeva. The case against Uraimov was dropped (Almaz, 2023).

Later that year, Zholbolduyeva was charged in connection with the death of journalist Arzygul Galymbetova, which authorities alleged was linked to one of her publications. Although she was a mother of two young children and faced no accusations of violent crime, she was placed in pretrial detention—apparently in violation of norms set out in the Criminal Procedure Code. Her lawyer, Nazgul Suyunbaeva, said law enforcement officers privately admitted that the order for her detention had come “from above” as a way to “make her reflect on her behavior” (Kaktus. media, 2022). Investigators based the charges on a psychological expert analysis of Arzygul Galymbetova, claiming that damage to Galymbetova’s mental health had been established during a post-mortem.<sup>11</sup> Zholbolduyeva’s relatives stated that the persecution could be in relation to her professional activities and the fact that she investigated regional authorities including police, Prosecutor’s Office and Arzybek Burhanov, an ex-Jogorku Kenesh deputy (Kozhobaeva, 2022).

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<sup>10</sup> @ASHUROFFPRO (BATMA BAT)

<sup>11</sup> From criminal case materials, to which Freedom for Eurasia has access



In May 2023, the Batken Regional Court acquitted Zholbolduyeva on two counts (Article 190 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic “Violation of privacy” and Article 127 “Causing death by negligence”). The blogger was, however, found guilty of “Hooliganism” (Article 280) and fined 50,000 soms, and “Forgery of Documents” (Article 379, for which she received one year of probation (Almaz, 2023).

In December 2024 Zholbolduyeva posted on her social media profile a video statement about sexual violence that she said she was subjected to in April 2022 whilst in detention in Batken. According to her statement, the heads of the detention center arranged her rape by male prisoners while she was under arrest. Zholbolduyeva said that she staged a suicide attempt to get out of the facility alive. She reported the assault in hospital. After that, she said she was taken in a police van, where she was promised that she would be examined by medics. But the police did not take her to any kind of examination. Instead, after driving for five hours, she was brought to a different detention facility, in the city of Jalal-Abad (Vesti.kg, 2024).

According to Zholbolduyeva’s complaint, she reported the sexual assault in the temporary detention center to the Prosecutor’s Office, the Ombudsman, the head of the SCNS, and the National Center for the Prevention of Torture. But the criminal case based on her complaint was closed by the Batken Regional Prosecutor’s Office in 2025 due to what prosecutors claimed was a lack of evidence.

In March 2025, the Batken Regional Department of Internal Affairs initiated a criminal case against Zholbolduyeva on charges of disseminating false information. The case was brought by the same department whose officers she had previously accused of the abuse.<sup>12</sup> The people she accused of organizing her rape in detention, including the head of Batken Regional Department of Internal Affairs Colonel Almaz Shagamurzaev, the head of the temporary detention center and a prison guard called Roman Rustamov, were recognized as victims by investigators of the Batken regional police department. On July 17, 2025, Zholbolduyeva was found guilty of disseminating false information by the Batken regional court and was sentenced to a year of probation.<sup>13</sup>

This retaliatory prosecution not only undermined Zholbolduyeva’s right to a fair investigation and access to justice, but also set a discouraging precedent for other victims of sexual violence and abuse, reinforcing fear of reprisals and diminishing trust in law enforcement institutions.

***Irina Karamushkina***, a politician and former member of the Jogorku Kenesh of the IV, V, and VI convocations, was targeted in a politically charged criminal case ahead of the 2024 municipal elections. In March 2024, police raided the office of the Social Democrats party and detained several members, including party leader Temirlan Sultanbekov, campaign chief Irina Karamushkina, and representative Roza Turksever, on charges of vote buying. Karamushkina’s home was also searched.

The case centered on a recorded conversation between Karamushkina and Daniyar Cholponbaev, a candidate for the Bishkek City Council, in which she mentioned giving 15,000 soms to campaign

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12 Zholbolduyeva’s social media post, dated July 17, 2025: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1A8kx868fe/>

13 Zholbolduyeva’s social media post, dated July 17, 2025: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/14HFS5hGoC1/>

staffer Nazar Niyazov. According to the CEC, this amount was legally transferred through the party's election fund (Freedom for Eurasia, 2024).

While in detention, Karamushkina filed a complaint stating that she was moved to a cell with poorer conditions following visits from the Ombudsman's Office, the NCPT, and the Special Prosecutor's Office (Vesti.kg, n.d.).

At a closed trial that concluded in April 2025, Karamushkina and two co-defendants received probationary sentences. The case drew criticism from human rights organizations and the European Parliament, which called the charges politically motivated and urged the Kyrgyz government to drop the prosecution (Sánchez Amor, 2025).

The case of **Altyn Kapalova**, feminist activist, an artist, researcher, and writer, exemplifies state-level structural gender discrimination.<sup>14</sup> Since 2020, Kapalova has led a legal battle to legalize the use of matronymics<sup>15</sup> in Kyrgyzstan. In December that year, Kapalova successfully reissued her children's birth certificates using her matronymic, likely because her gender-neutral name went unnoticed. However, in February 2021, the Department of Civil Registration filed a lawsuit against her and revoked the certificates.

In 2023, she achieved a partial victory when the Constitutional Court issued a landmark ruling in support of gender equality, allowing adult children to change their patronymics to reflect their mother's name. The decision did not extend to assigning matronymics at birth, maintaining the default use of patronymics for newborns (HRW, 2023). This ruling, however, sparked a heated debate and a swift reaction from the authorities, including the president and his administration, who swiftly proposed constitutional amendments to allow the reversal of Constitutional Court decisions deemed incompatible with "moral and ethical values". SCNS head Tashiev publicly denounced the decision, stating that "there is no such thing as a matronymic. Whoever approved it, they must cancel it too" (Janybek kyzy & Lee, 2023). Kyrgyz State Secretary, Suyunbek Kasmanbetov, echoed this patriarchal stance, declaring that "lineage continues only through the father", while Mufti Zamir Rakiev also opposed the use of matronymics (Kaktus.media, 2021). On September 28, 2023, Jogorku Kenesh voted in favor of the proposed amendments, effectively undermining the authority of the Constitutional Court and sending a clear message that demands for gender equality will be met with institutional resistance and political retaliation (Abdyldayev, 2022).

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14 Freedom for Eurasia views the case as an example of structural violence rather than political violence in accordance with Bardall Bjarnegård and Piscopo categorization.

15 Matronymic - a name based on the given name of one's mother, grandmother, or any female ancestor.

## Conclusion

The cases documented in this paper reveal a consistent pattern of state-enabled and in many cases sanctioned repression targeting women engaged in politics and activism. The Kyrgyz government employs a broad toolkit to deter their participation, including blackmail, smear campaigns, digital and physical surveillance, threats and intimidation directed at both women and their families, arbitrary arrests, prolonged pre-trial detention, politically motivated charges, denial of due process, the instrumentalization of forensic linguistic expertise to criminalize speech, and, in some instances, physical violence and abuse in custody. Falsified criminal cases are among the instruments used by the state to pressure women out of social life. Long prison terms and the forced separation of mothers from their children represent an especially alarming trend. These tactics are not isolated and form part of a deliberate strategy to discourage women from occupying public space and holding the state accountable.

Importantly, some of these are gendered in form and impact. As primary caregivers in their families, women face heightened vulnerability: persecution not only jeopardizes their own safety but also directly threatens the well-being of their children and dependent relatives. Tactics such as house raids, asset seizures, or denial of sentence deferral exploit this caregiving role, amplifying pressure and punishment. The growing number of harsh and publicized cases sends a clear message to women that political engagement carries unbearable personal costs. Reinforced by a culture of impunity, biased courts, and the absence of institutional safeguards, these practices create a hostile environment that systematically excludes women from the public sphere.

Given the scale and consistency of repression, international actors must recognize the acute risks faced by politically active women in Kyrgyzstan. Any intervention aimed at supporting civil society and democratic resilience must integrate robust protection components, including dedicated funding for psychosocial support, legal and medical assistance, rapid response mechanisms, and relocation aid where necessary. While supporting their rights, it is also necessary to recognize and mitigate against their increasing vulnerability to state-led violence and repression.

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