



ENC ANALYSIS



Karakalpakstan: Not separatists, but separate

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Table of Contents

About the author	3
Introduction	4
Karakalpakstan	4
The Karakalpak People	5
History	7
The Soviet Period	7
After the fall of the USSR	8
Development of Karakalpakstan	10
July 2022 and After	13
Not Separatists, but Separate	19

About the author



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Introduction

Karakalpakstan, now part of Uzbekistan, and the Karakalpak people are one of the most interesting and tragic stories of Central Asia. This has been true for some 500 years, but after the unrest and deaths in Karakalpakstan at the beginning of July 2022, the region and those living there have been receiving unprecedented attention.

Life is hard in Karakalpakstan. It is already the location of one of the worst ecological disasters in history. Climate change and the current trajectory of domestic and foreign politics promise to make the situation even more dire in the coming decades. The organisation Minority Rights Group described Karakalpakstan as “one of the two poorest regions of Uzbekistan...”¹ and said “the Karakalpak population suffers higher levels of poverty, unemployment and poor health than their Uzbek neighbours.”¹

The complicated story of Karakalpakstan and its people illustrates the many challenges the region faces and the need for greater attention and assistance from the Uzbek government and international organisations.

Karakalpakstan

Karakalpakstan is located in what is now western Uzbekistan and covers roughly 37 percent of Uzbekistan’s territory. Karakalpakstan’s total territory is 166,590 square kilometres, making it larger than Tunisia (or Tajikistan).

The population of Karakalpakstan as of January 1, 2025, was some 2,002,700 people.² There are various demographic figures for Karakalpakstan, but they indicate a bit more than 40 percent of the population are ethnic Uzbeks, a bit less than 40 percent are Karakalpaks, with Kazakhs and to a lesser extent, Turkmen comprising most of the remaining 20 percent.

The majority of Karakalpakstan is located in the Kyzyl-Kum Desert. The Amu-Darya, one of Central Asia’s two great rivers, flows through Karakalpakstan and once emptied into the Aral Sea, part of which is in northern Karakalpakstan. The river ceased to reach the Aral Sea nearly two

¹ Minority Rights Group, “Karakalpaks in Uzbekistan,” <https://minorityrights.org/communities/karakalpaks/>

² “Распределение численности постоянного населения Республики Каракалпакстан (Distribution of the permanent population of the Republic of Karakalpakstan,” National Committee for Statistics of the Republic of Uzbekistan, accessed 12 July 2025, <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-goskomstata/49559-qoraqalpog-iston-resp-ublikasi-doimiy-aholisi-sonining-taqsimlanishi-3>

decades ago, hastening the desiccation of the sea, which is now less than 10 percent its normal size of 50 years ago. Most of the sea that is preserved is in Kazakhstan.

Karakalpaks have been living in the delta area of the Amu-Darya and fishing in the Aral Sea for centuries. The loss of the Aral Sea on the territory of Karakalpakstan is a devastating blow to the local economy.

The drying out of the Aral Sea has led to alkaline soils being picked up by strong winds and spread across areas in Karakalpakstan, southwestern Kazakhstan, and occasionally northeastern areas of Turkmenistan. This has caused significant increase in illnesses among people in the affected areas, particularly respiratory ailments, as well as damaging the limited crops able to grow along the edges of the desert.

The main crops in Karakalpakstan are alfalfa, rice, and corn, but during the Soviet period, cotton was extensively grown in Karakalpakstan via irrigation systems drawing water from the Amu-Darya.

Most of Uzbekistan's recent discoveries of oil and natural gas are in Karakalpakstan, mainly in the Ustyurt Plateau (the plateau also stretches across parts of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), but now including areas of the dried-up Aral Sea bed. Estimates of the amount of oil and gas range. The Ustyurt field is estimated to contain some 260 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas³. There are estimates that Karakalpakstan's gas reserves could be as much as 1.7 trillion cubic metres and oil reserves some 1.7 billion tonnes.⁴

The Karakalpak People

Karakalpak people embody a striking diversity, their appearances reflecting the region's ancient crossroads. Karakalpaks are a Turkic people, their appearance ranges from European to East Asian, and the majority are Sunni Muslims. Their name derives from their headwear. "Kara" means "black," and "kalpak" means "hat," though over the centuries Karakalpaks have adopted headwear that is not black in colour.

³ "NATURAL GAS RESERVES IN UZBEKISTAN ARE ESTIMATED AT 1.85 TRILLION CUM," Turksam, Turkic World Strategic Research Center, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, <https://orasan.manas.edu.kg/index.php/en/uzbekistan-2/6989-natural-gas-reserves-in-uzbekistan-are-estimated-at-1-85-trillion-cum>

⁴ "The Natural Resources of Karakalpakstan," The Karakalpaks, <http://karakalpak.com/naturalresources.html#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20these%20deposits,oil%20at%201.7%20billion%20tonnes.>

Mention of Karakalpaks dates back to the 15th Century, Like many peoples of Central Asia today, the Karakalpaks are a mixtures of Hunnic and Turkic peoples that passed through the region over millennia. Karakalpaks are closer to the Kazakhs than to any of the other Turkic peoples of Central Asia.

Their immediate neighbours – the Kazakhs, Turkmen, and Uzbeks – outnumber the Karakalpaks. Still, the Karakalpaks once lived across a wide area, from the Emba River area, east of the northern part of the Caspian Sea <http://karakalpak.com/history.html>, down the lower reaches of the Amu-Darya in the south, and from middle Syr-Darya (the other of Central Asia's two large rivers) in the east to the areas bordering Turkmen tribes in the west. In the middle of this area is the Aral Sea, once the fourth largest lake in the world.

Karakalpaks were semi-nomadic. They had separate areas where they lived in the winter and in the summer, but these were established places from which they left and returned to, according to the season. Karakalpaks traditionally herded cattle and goats, not sheep like other Turkic groups. The marshes of the Amu-Darya provided food for people and animals, as well as building material such as reeds, and crops were grown in areas near the marshes. However, the marshes were also home to large numbers of mosquitos and disease often spread among those living in the area.

Estimates of the number of Karakalpaks range but globally they probably number some 900,000 to 1 million. According to Uzbekistan's State Statistics Committee, as of January 1, 2021, there were some 752,700 Karakalpaks living in Uzbekistan.⁵ The number of Karakalpaks in Kazakhstan might be more than 250,000. A February 2005 report from the Institute of War and Peace Reporting said according to Kazakhstan's Agency for Demography and Migration, some 63,000 Karakalpak had moved from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan in the years after independence.⁶ The report also mentioned that "specialists from the Karakalpak branch of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea were saying as many as 250,000 people from Karakalpakstan had emigrated to Kazakhstan during the previous seven years. The Astana Times reported in November 2018

⁵ "Опубликованы данные об этническом составе населения Узбекистана (Data on the ethnic composition of the population of Uzbekistan has been published)," Gazeta.uz, 20 August 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/20/ethnic-groups/>

⁶ "КАРАКАЛПАКИ ХОТЯТ ЖИТЬ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ (Karakalpaks Want to Live in Kazakhstan," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 21 February 2005, <https://iwpr.net/ru/global-voices/karakalpaki-khotyat-zhit-v-kazakhstane>

that there were some 56,000 Karakalpaks living in Kazakhstan.⁷ Thousands of Karakalpaks also live in Turkiye, Iran, Turkmenistan, and in lesser numbers in Russia, and other countries.

History

The ruins of ancient fortresses and caravanserais dot Karakalpakstan, some dating back more than 2,000 years, showing the region was settled long ago. Water was once more plentiful and there is evidence of widespread agriculture and herding. Over the course of centuries, successive waves of migrations of peoples from the east passed through the area that is now Karakalpakstan, and the region was part of several empires.

There is still debate about who the ancient ancestors of the Karakalpaks, but it is widely agreed they had formed their first confederation as “Karakalpaks” in the 15th Century. The Karakalpaks were gradually forced into the oases and Amu-Darya delta by the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Turkmen as these groups expanded their territories, pushing the Karakalpaks into smaller areas.

In 1812, the Khiva Khanate finally conquered the Karakalpaks and absorbed them into the Khivan khan’s realm. There are accounts that record the period that followed as one the hardest on the Karakalpak people as they were gradually moved off agricultural land and into the edges of the desert where they eked out a living. Their situation improved a little after Tsarist Russia conquered Khiva in 1873, if for no other reason than the Khivan khan was in no position to continue repressing the Karakalpaks as had been the case during the previous 60 years.

The Soviet Period

In 1924, Soviet authorities established the Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast. In 1925, the Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic was created (as part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) and Karakalpakstan was attached to the Kazakh Autonomous Republic. In July 1930, Karakalpakstan was removed from the Kazakh Republic but remained part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. At the

⁷ “Karakalpaks’ unique culture worth celebrating and preserving in Kazakhstan, says community leader,” Astana Times, 19 November 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/11/karakalpaks-unique-culture-worth-celebrating-and-preserving-in-kazakhstan-says-community-leader/>

start of 1932, Karakalpakstan was elevated in status into an autonomous union republic and retained that status when it was made part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in December 1936.

At the end of 1990, the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic's Supreme Council adopted a Declaration on State Sovereignty that included the possibility to secede from the Uzbek SSR, or even from the USSR, through a referendum conducted in the Karakalpak Republic.

Generally, the Soviet period was a time of stability for the Karakalpaks as they no longer needed to worry about being attacked by neighbouring Turkic groups. However, Soviet-era irrigation projects in Central Asia and the construction of the Kara-Kum Canal significantly reduced the amount of water that reached Karakalpak territory and decades later would lead to the drying up of the Aral Sea. Additionally, the Soviet Union used "Vozrozhdeniya (Rebirth)" Island in the Aral Sea as a biological weapons development centre.

After the fall of the USSR

On January 9, 1992, several months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Karakalpakstan became the Republic of Karakalpakstan, but remained part of Uzbekistan. On April 9, 1993, Karakalpakstan adopted its own constitution. Article 1 of that constitution states, "Karakalpakstan is a sovereign democratic republic, part of the Republic of Uzbekistan."⁸ Karakalpakstan has its own parliament, the Jogorku Kenes, its own flag, and anthem.

At an extraordinary session of Karakalpakstan's Supreme Soviet in February 1991, Dauletbai Shamshetov was selected to be the body's chairman. From November 1991 to June 1992, he served as president of the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic. When Shamshetov stepped down as president in June 1992, many felt it was due to pressure from Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov.

In 1993, Karakalpakstan signed a reunification agreement with the Uzbek government. The agreement called for Karakalpakstan to remain part of Uzbekistan for 20 years, after which the agreement could be extended, or

⁸ "Конституция Республики Каракалпакстан (Constitution of the Republic of Karakalpakstan)," ЖОКАРГЫ КЕНЕС РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАРАКАЛПАКСТАН (Parliament of the Republic of Karakalpakstan) website, 30 August 2019, <https://joqargikenes.uz/ru/qar-res-konstituciyasi>

Karakalpakstan could conduct a referendum on seceding and becoming independent.⁹

Several years before 2013, Uzbek authorities started working to neutralise the small pro-independence groups that were campaigning for secession. Aman Sagidullayev formed the Alga (Forward) Karakalpakstan pro-independence movement in 2008. In 2011, Sagidullayev was charged with embezzling some \$1 million while he was head of an agricultural equipment manufacturer in Karakalpakstan, charges Sagidullayev denied, and was forced to flee the country, followed shortly after by relatives and friends.¹⁰

Pro-independence groups and activists in Karakalpakstan were effectively silenced before 2013 and the year passed without any mention from Uzbek authorities about the 1993 agreement.

Karakalpak activists have complained about forced sterilisation programmes targeting Karakalpak women.¹¹

There have been accusations Uzbek authorities attempted to resettle ethnic Uzbeks from other parts of Uzbekistan to Karakalpakstan to alter the demographic. Minority Rights Group International said in June 2018, “while there does not obviously seem to be any state-sponsored policies of transmigration to bring in Uzbeks to further dilute the presence of Karakalpaks, there has been a noticeable in-flow of Uzbeks into the agricultural lands of the republic's south in recent years.”¹²

This “in-flow” has been accompanied by the exodus of anywhere from 50,000 to 200,000 Karakalpaks who moved to Kazakhstan.

⁹ Sinem Özdemir, “Republic of Karakalpakstan retains autonomy,” Deutsche Welle, 4 July 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/republic-of-karakalpakstan-retains-autonomy-in-uzbekistan/a-62357018>

¹⁰ Pannier, Bruce “No Celebration For Karakalpakstan's Independence Day,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, December 18, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/karakalpakstan-independence-day-uzbekistan/27435839.html>

¹¹ “Тоталитарные методы по отношению к этническим меньшинствам кочуют и по Узбекистану (Totalitarian methods towards ethnic minorities are spreading throughout Uzbekistan), Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty Uzbek Service Radio Ozodlik, 30 September 2019, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/30178922.html>

¹² “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Uzbekistan : Karakalpaks, The UN Refugee Agency, accessed 12 July 2025, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/mrgi/2018/en/64348>

Development of Karakalpakstan

Karakalpakstan is one of the poorest areas of Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek government has paid more attention to Karakalpakstan since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president in late 2016. Under Mirziyoyev's predecessor, Islam Karimov, scant attention and resources were devoted to Karakalpakstan.

President Mirziyoyev started his campaign for re-election in 2021 in Karakalpakstan.

In March 2017, Mirziyoyev signed a resolution exempting legal entities in Karakalpakstan (and Khorezm) from “mandatory sales of hard currency revenue from export of industrial products of own production, except raw materials.”¹³ Businesses in Karakalpakstan producing pharmaceutical and medical materials, electrotechnical goods, or construction materials were exempted from property tax, land tax, and other taxes.

During a visit to Karakalpakstan in August 2024, Uzbek media reported on the progress in Karakalpakstan in recent years, including \$1.9 billion allocated for projects in Karakalpakstan that included new schools, medical facilities, and agricultural development.¹⁴ President Mirziyoyev said the number of people living in poverty in Karakalpakstan had dropped from 13.6% to 8.5%.¹⁵

Mirziyoyev also tasked his eldest daughter Saida with overseeing development in Karakalpakstan.

There are government- and foreign-sponsored projects underway to cover dried-out parts of the Aral Sea with plants to prevent the alkaline soil that damages human health and crops from being picked up and blown by the wind.¹⁶ There are also water conservation projects, though these face formidable challenges due to the already visible effects of climate change

¹³ “President provides preferences to businesses in Karakalpakstan and Khorezm region,” UzDaily.com, 27 March 2017, <https://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-38834.htm>

¹⁴ “Opportunities and future tasks for Karakalpakstan analyzed,” UzDaily.com, 19 August 2024, <https://uzdaily.uz/en/opportunities-and-future-tasks-for-karakalpakstan-analyzed/>

¹⁵ “С. Мирзиёева и Т. Худайбергенов будут контролировать исполнение поручений по развитию Каракалпакстана (S. Mirziyoyeva and T. Khudaibergenov will monitor the implementation of instructions on the development of Karakalpakstan),” Gazeta.uz, 19 August 2024, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/08/19/karakalpakstan/>

¹⁶ Sonam Lama Hyolmo, “Uzbekistan plants a forest where a sea once lay,” Mongabay, 29 May 2024, <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/05/uzbekistan-plants-a-forest-where-a-sea-once-lay/>

in Central Asia and Afghanistan's plans to open the Qosh Tepa canal in 2028. Starting in the Soviet era, Central Asia drew water from the Amu-Darya for irrigating farmland and cotton fields, as well as feeding the Gara-Gum canal that runs across the desert of southern Turkmenistan to the capital Ashgabat.

The Qosh Tepa canal will draw water from the Amu-Darya, the first time Afghanistan has tapped into this vital source of water, but once the canal is open it will take 15-20 percent of the water from the river, leaving downstream communities in Central Asia with less water.¹⁷ Karakalpakstan is the furthest downstream area on the Amu-Darya and the reduction of water caused by the Qosh Tepa canal will force many people in Karakalpakstan to relocate.

The European Investment Bank agreed in September 2019 to provide 100 million euros for modernising the irrigation systems in Karakalpakstan and reclamation of saline soil.¹⁸ In September 2021, the Islamic Development Bank announced a \$200-million loan for modernising the agricultural sector in Karakalpakstan and the Khorezm, Bukhara, and Navoi provinces.

The UNDP funded reconstruction of the water system to the Takhtakupyr district, bringing potable running water to more than 21,000 residents, and also installation of five new electricity transformers to provide more reliable supplies of electricity to the district.¹⁹

The UN launched two projects in August 2024 to improve the environmental and health situation. One, through UNICEF, is a project on "Enhancing Climate-Resilient and Safe Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Health Services for the Most Affected Communities in Four Districts of Karakalpakstan." The other, a joint project of the UNDP and Food and Agriculture Organisation, is for "Building Knowledge and Skills of Local Partners and Communities to Address Environmental Insecurities through Innovative Air, Land, and Water Management Solutions in the Aral Sea Region."²⁰

¹⁷ Bruce Pannier, "Taliban's 'thirsty' Qosh Tepa Canal looming large for Central Asia neighbours," BNE Intellinews, 9 August 2023, <https://www.intellinews.com/pannier-taliban-s-thirsty-qosh-tepa-canal-looming-large-for-central-asia-neighbours-287482/>

¹⁸ "EIB and Uzbekistan take first steps towards a EUR 100m investment program for the recovery of the Aral Sea," European Investment Bank, 24 September 2019, <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2019-226-eib-and-uzbekistan-take-first-steps-towards-a-eur-100-m-investment-program-for-the-recovery-of-the-aral-sea>

¹⁹ "Жители Тахтакупыра в Каракалпакстане получили доступ к воде и электричеству (Residents of Takhtakupyr in Karakalpakstan gain access to water and electricity), Gazeta.uz, 19 December 2019, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/12/19/infrastructure/>

²⁰ "United Nations Launches Projects to Address Environmental and Health Challenges in Karakalpakstan," United Nations website, 19 August 2024,

The World Bank approved a \$100 million credit in May 2025 for modernising Uzbekistan's electricity distribution system "particularly in regions such as Karakalpakstan and Surkhandarya."²¹

Germany's Society for International Cooperation (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), or GIZ, has been helping to support several of Uzbek government's programmes in Karakalpakstan, including agriculture, adapting to climate change and water scarcity, and strengthening the healthcare system.²²

Karakalpakstan is also becoming a center for wind farm projects.

In August 2024, Chinese company SANY Renewable started construction of a wind farm in Karakalpakstan's Kungrad district that will generate some 1000 megawatts (MW) of electricity. The project will cost \$1.2 billion.²³

That same month, Saudi company ACWA started work on a 200-MW wind farm project and 100 MW battery energy storage system in Karakalpakstan's Beruni district.²⁴ The cost of that project is \$250 million.

SANY Renewable signed another deal to build another 1000-MW wind farm in Karakalpakstan in April 2025.²⁵

<https://uzbekistan.un.org/en/276602-united-nations-launches-projects-address-environmental-and-health-challenges-karakalpakstan>

²¹ Sadokat Jalolova, "World Bank Approves \$100 Million to Modernize Uzbekistan's Power Grid," The Times of Central Asia, 19 May 2025,

<https://timesca.com/world-bank-approves-100-million-to-modernize-uzbekistans-power-grid/>

²² "Building a Sustainable Future for Karakalpakstan," Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit website, accessed 12 July 2025,

<https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2024-en-Building-a-sustainable-future-for-Karakalpakstan.pdf>

²³ "Мирзиёев дал старт строительству ВЭС и открыл торговые комплексы в Каракалпакстане (Mirziyoyev launched construction of wind farm and opened shopping malls in Karakalpakstan)," Fergana.ru, 19 August 2024, <https://fergana.media/news/134641/>

²⁴ "ACWA POWER HOSTS GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY FOR 200MW BERUNIY WIND POWER PLANT AND 100MW BESS PROJECT IN KARAKALPAKSTAN," ACWA Power website, 20 August 2024, <https://www.acwapower.com/news/acwa-power-hosts-groundbreaking-ceremony-for-200mw-beruniy-wind-power-plant-and-100mw-bess-project-in-karakalpakstan/>

²⁵ "Китайские компании построят ветряную и солнечную электростанции в Узбекистане (Chinese companies to build wind and solar power plants in Uzbekistan)," Fergana.ru, 8 April 2025, <https://fergana.media/news/137360/>

Uzbek authorities plan to attract \$11 billion in foreign investment to build 10 more wind farms in Karakalpakstan capable of generating a combined 10,300 MW by 2030.²⁶

July 2022 and After

In May 2022, the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (LDPU) proposed making amendments to Uzbekistan's constitution. The LDPU was formed by former Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 2003. The LDPU has won the most seats in every parliamentary since then and Karimov in 2007 and 2014, then Mirziyoyev in 2016, 2021, and 2023 ran as the LDPU's candidate for president.

The main purpose of amending the constitution was to allow Mirziyoyev to stay on as president. According to Uzbekistan's constitution, an individual could only serve as president for two terms of five years each. Mirziyoyev's election in 2021 should therefore have been his last term as president. One proposed amendment changed the term in office from five to seven years, which judicial and constitutional bodies interpreted as meaning Mirziyoyev would be eligible to run for two more terms. Mirziyoyev's predecessor Islam Karimov had done exactly the same thing to prolong his term in office.

However, the special commission drafting constitutional amendments also removed articles on Karakalpakstan's sovereign status and right to conduct a referendum to secede from Uzbekistan. The text of the proposed amendments was made public on June 25, 2022.²⁷

Shortly after publication of the amendments, protests started in towns in Karakalpakstan, such as Chimbai and Muynak, and police started detaining demonstrators, activists, and bloggers who were posting about the situation in Karakalpakstan.²⁸ By June 27, internet connections were cut in Karakalpakstan.

²⁶ "Мирзиёев дал старт строительству ВЭС и открыл торговые комплексы в Каракалпакстане (Mirziyoyev launched construction of wind farm and opened shopping malls in Karakalpakstan)," Fergana.ru, 19 August 2024, <https://fergana.media/news/134641/>

²⁷ "Из нового варианта узбекской Конституции исключили суверенный статус Каракалпакстана и его право на выход из состава республики (The sovereign status of Karakalpakstan and its right to secede from the republic were excluded from the new version of the Uzbek Constitution)," Mediazona.ca, 26 June 2022, <https://mediazona.ca/news/2022/06/26/karakalpakstan>

²⁸ "Жители Каракалпакстана протестуют против изменения Конституции Узбекистана (Residents of Karakalpakstan protest against changes to the Constitution of Uzbekistan)," Turkmen.news, 30 June 2022, <https://turkmen.news/karakalpakstan-protest/>

On July 1, Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov, a Karakalpak lawyer, rights activist, and journalist went to the administration building in the Karakalpakstan capital Nukus to request permission for conducting a public meeting on July 5 against the proposed changes to the constitution that affected Karakalpakstan. Tazhimuratov was detained. Word spread through Nukus that Tazhimuratov had been arrested, and tens of thousands of people²⁹ came out into the streets. Most eventually gathered outside the administration building in Nukus demanding Tazhimuratov's release.

According to Uzbek media outlet Gazeta.uz, Murat Kamalov, the chairman of the Jokargy Kenes (the parliament of Karakalpakstan), spoke to the crowd with activist Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov at his side.³⁰

By all accounts, the protest was peaceful until police and security forces attempted to disperse the crowd by firing tear gas and stun grenades. Violence broke out and spread to areas in Nukus and other cities. Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in an investigative report released several months after the unrest that police and security forces in some cases appear to have responded with "inappropriate use of small arms and various types of grenades, weapons that can cause severe injuries and death when used recklessly."³¹

Officially, 21 people were killed and 243 injured in the worst violence in Uzbekistan since the events in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan in May 2005. Karakalpak activists say several hundred people died.

There has been no possibility to do an independent investigation, however, Kazakh rights activist Galym Ageleuov traveled to Karakalpakstan in late January-early February 2023 and interviewed "relatives of the victims" and the 22 people convicted at the end of January 2023.³² Ageleuov planned to

²⁹ "В Каракалпакстане протесты из-за изменения статуса региона в Конституции. МВД Узбекистана назвал акции незаконными (There are protests in Karakalpakstan due to a change in the status of the region in the Constitution. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan called the actions illegal)," Радио Озодлик, 2 July 2022, <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/31925185.html>

³⁰ "МВД сделало заявление по ситуации в Каракалпакстане (The Ministry of Internal Affairs made a statement on the situation in Karakalpakstan)," Gazeta.uz, 1 July 2022, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/07/01/nukus/>

³¹ "Uzbekistan: Police Abuses in Autonomous Region Protests," Human Rights Watch, 7 November 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/uzbekistan-police-abuses-autonomous-region-protests>

³² "Deceased and injured in the July 1-2, 2022 events in Karakalpakstan (analysis and lists)," Freedom for Eurasia, 2 July 2023, <https://freedomforeurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Dead-and-wounded-in-Karakalpakstan-events-analysis-and-lists-ENG-FIN.pdf>

attend the appeal hearing in May 2023 for the those convicted in January, but was denied entry by authorities in Uzbekistan.³³

Karakalpakstan's parliament, the Jokargy Kenes, released a statement on July 2 blaming the violence on “provocateurs” who used the protest to “attempt to seize government institutions and create a split in society and destabilize the socio-political situation in Uzbekistan.”³⁴

President Mirziyoyev arrived in Nukus on July 2. He had just been in Karakalpakstan on June 30 to participate in ceremonies marking Youth Day. He talked about the unity across Uzbekistan and said, “I am a son not only of Uzbekistan, but also of Karakalpakstan.”³⁵

He addressed the Jokargi Kenes, blaming “several groups” for trying to raid the local Interior Ministry building and National Guard facilities to steal weapons.³⁶ But Mirziyoyev also criticized local officials for supporting the proposed changes to the constitution that had sparked the protests. “You yourself were at the heart of this, you yourself took the initiative,” Mirziyoyev said and asked, “Why didn’t you call me and say people here were dissatisfied?”³⁷

The Uzbek president announced that all the proposed amendments affecting Karakalpakstan would be withdrawn and sacked several top officials in Karakalpakstan.

Eventually 61 people were charged for participation in the violence, all of them protesters. The venue for the hearings was Bukhara, which prevented many locals from Karakalpakstan, including relatives, from attending the trials. The trials of the first 39 defendants included Tazhimuratov and the

³³ “Human rights defender from Kazakhstan Galym Ageleuov barred from entering Uzbekistan,” Front Line Defenders, 24 May 2023,

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/human-rights-defender-kazakhstan-galym-ageleuov-barred-entering-uzbekistan>

³⁴ “К событиям в Каракалпакстане (On the events in Karakalpakstan),” Jokargy Kenes website joargikenes.uz, 2 July 2022, <https://joqargikenes.uz/ru/11171.html>

³⁵ “Президент: «Я сын не только Узбекистана, но и Каракалпакстана» (President: “I am the son not only of Uzbekistan, but also of Karakalpakstan”), Gazeta.uz, 30 June 2022, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/06/30/karakalpakstan/>

³⁶ “Uzbekistan reports ‘fatalities’ in constitutional reform unrest,” Daily Sabah, 3 July 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/uzbekistan-reports-fatalities-in-constitutional-reform-unrest>

³⁷ “МВД Каракалпакстана назвало митинги против поправок к Конституции «попыткой захвата власти». Президент ввел режим ЧП в стране (The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Karakalpakstan called the rallies against amendments to the Constitution “an attempt to seize power.” The President introduced a state of emergency in the country),” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty Uzbek Service Radio Ozodlik, 3 July 2022, <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/mvd-karakalpakstana-nazvalo-mitingi-protiv-popravok-v-konstitutsiyu-popytkoy-zahvata-vlasti/31926242.html>

chief editor of Karakalpak media outlet Makan.uz, Lolagul Kallykhanova, who, after the text of the amendments was published on June 25, wrote on social media, “Uzbek-Karakalpak relations have long been strained. It’s doubtful that Karakalpakstan’s confidence in Uzbekistan will remain the same.”³⁸

On January 31, 2023, Tazhimuratov was sentenced to 16 years in prison.³⁹ Kallykhanova and three others were freed on parole.⁴⁰ Former policeman Polat Shamshetov, the son of Karakalpakstan’s president in 1991-1992, Dauletbai Shamshetov, was convicted for taking part in the protest and sentenced to six years in prison.⁴¹ Polat Shamshetov died on February 4 while still in a police detention centre.⁴² Uzbek authorities said the 45-year-old Shamshetov died of a heart attack and mentioned Shamshetov was a heavy smoker and that probably contributed to his death.

Kazakhstan also detained several Karakalpak activists after the Uzbek government filed charges against them and requested their extradition. Koshkarbai Toremuratov, Zhangeldy Zhaksymbetov, and Raisa Khudaibergenova were detained in Almaty in September 2022, Ziyar Mirmanbetova in October, also in Almaty,⁴³ and Tleubike Yuldasheva in November while trying to cross from Kazakhstan into Russia.⁴⁴

All remained in detention in Kazakhstan for about one year before being released and leaving for third countries.

³⁸ “Uzbekistan: A possible change in the status of Karakalpakstan has become a political ‘bomb,’” ACCA Media, 29 June 2022, <https://acca.media/en/15526/uzbekistan-a-possible-change-in-the-status-of-karakalpakstan-has-become-a-political-bomb/>

³⁹ “Даулетмурат Тажимуратов приговорён к 16 годам лишения свободы (Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov sentenced to 16 years in prison),” Gazeta.uz, 31 January 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/31/tajimuratov/>

⁴⁰ “Каллыханова, Турданов, Сметуллаев и Нуратдинов освобождены из зала суда (Kallikhanova, Turdanov, Smetullaev and Nuratdinov released from the courtroom),” Gazeta.uz, 31 January 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/31/court/>

⁴¹ “Оглашены приговоры по делу о событиях в Каракалпакстане (Sentences announced in Karakalpakstan events case),” Gazeta.uz, 31 January 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/31/nukus-incident/>

⁴² “Скончался Полат Шамшетов, осуждённый по делу о нукусских событиях (Polat Shamshetov, convicted in Nukus events case, dies),” Gazeta.uz, 4 February 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/02/04/polat-shamshetov/>

⁴³ “Kazakhstan: Don’t Deport Activists to Uzbekistan,” Human Rights Watch, 15 October 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/15/kazakhstan-dont-deport-activists-uzbekistan>

⁴⁴ “Казахстанские пограничники по запросу Узбекистана задержали каракалпакскую правозащитницу при попытке выехать в Россию (Kazakh border guards detained Karakalpak human rights activist at Uzbekistan’s request while attempting to leave for Russia),” Mediazona.ca, 13 November 2022, <https://mediazona.ca/news/2022/11/13/yuldasheva>

Karakalpak activist Aqylbek Muratbai, who emerged as a leading spokesperson for the Karakalpaks after the July 2022 unrest, was also detained in Kazakhstan in February 2024. Karakalpak activist Rasul Jumaniyazov was detained in Astana in March,⁴⁵ and another Karakalpak activist, Rinat Utambetov, in Almaty in April.⁴⁶

Uzbek authorities accused Muratbai of calling for mass unrest by posting appeals for people to turn off the lights in their homes on November 23, 2023, for 16 minutes in recognition of the 16 years in prison Tazhimuratov is serving.⁴⁷

Kazakhstan extradited Utambetov to Uzbekistan in late January 2025, about the same time that Russia extradited another Karakalpak activist, Zhetkerbai Abdramanov, to Uzbekistan.⁴⁸ Both were immediately taken into custody. Utambetov was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison on April 17, 2025.⁴⁹ On April 29, Abdramanov was sentenced to 4 years and 7 months of home imprisonment.⁵⁰

Muratbai was released on February 15, 2025, and remains in Kazakhstan.⁵¹

⁴⁵ “Another Karakalpak activist, Rasul Jumaniyazov is arrested in Astana,” Freedom for Eurasia, 30 march 2024,

<https://freedomforeurasia.org/another-karakalpak-activist-rasul-jumaniyazov-is-arrested-in-astana/>

⁴⁶ “Another Karakalpak activist detained in Almaty, Kazakhstan,” Freedom for Eurasia, 3 April 2024,

<https://freedomforeurasia.org/another-karakalpak-activist-detained-in-almaty-kazakhstan/>

⁴⁷ “Год в казахстанской тюрьме, выезд в Европу и угроза высылки. Путь каракалпакского активиста (A year in a Kazakh prison, departure to Europe and the threat of deportation. The path of a Karakalpak activist),” RFERL Kazakh Service Azattyq, 28 February 2024,

<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/karakalpak-activist-koshkarbay-toremuratovs-case/32837713.html>

⁴⁸ “Высланные из Казахстана и России в Узбекистан каракалпакские активисты помещены в СИЗО Нукуса (Karakalpak activists expelled from Kazakhstan and Russia to Uzbekistan placed in Nukus pretrial detention center),” RFERL Kazakh Service Azattyq, 4 February 2025,

<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/vyslannye-iz-kazahstana-i-rossii-v-uzbekistan-karakalpakskie-aktivisty-pomescheny-v-sizo-nukusa/33302834.html>

⁴⁹ | Приговоренному к тюрьме каракалпакскому активисту Ринату Утамбетову отказали в апелляции (Karakalpak activist Rinat Utambetov, sentenced to prison, denied appeal),” RFERL Kazakh Service Azattyq, 3 July 2025,

<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/prigovorennomu-k-tyurme-karakalpakskomu-aktivistu-rinatu-utambetovu-otkazali-v-apellyatsii/33462711.html>

⁵⁰ “Statement on the Release of Zhetkerbai Abdramanov to Home Imprisonment,” Freedom for Eurasia, 29 April 2025,

<https://freedomforeurasia.org/statement-on-the-release-of-zhetkerbai-abdramanov-to-home-imprisonment/>

⁵¹ “HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER AQYLBK MURATBAI RELEASED FROM DETENTION,” Front Line Defenders, 18 February 2025,

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/human-rights-defender-aqylbek-muratbai-released-detention>

Jumaniyazov remained in detention in Kazakhstan until March 2025 when he was released and is also still in Kazakhstan.⁵²

Karakalpak blogger Mustafa Tursynbayev, who ran a video channel called “Nukus Online” was sentenced by a Nukus court in March 2024 to five years in prison for extortion. Rights activists said the evidence presented against Tursynbayev in court was not compelling. On February 17, 2025, Tursynbayev died.⁵³ He had been in coma after part of a wall collapsed on him.

Tazhimuratov’s lawyer, Sergei Mayorov, has claimed several times that Tazhimuratov is being mistreated in prison, most recently in May 2025 when Mayorov said Tazhimuratov was beaten when he refused to sign the Uzbek national anthem.⁵⁴ Less than two months earlier, Mayorov said Tazhimuratov was being subjected to “mental and physical torture” that, according to Human Rights Watch, “included beatings by other inmates at the behest of prison officials and filthy conditions in Tazhimuratov’s cell.”⁵⁵ The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders released a statement in July 2025 about Tazhimuratov’s “ongoing arbitrary detention.” The statement raised concerns about “new allegations regarding beatings,” and also allegations of “theft of [Tazhimuratov’s] personal belongings, intimidation, seizure of food prior to the breaking of his fast during Ramadan, provision of unsanitary bedding and mattress, and repeated placement in solitary confinement.”⁵⁶

⁵² Vitaly Ponomarov, “Каракалпакский активист освобождён из СИЗО в Астане (Karakalpak activist released from pretrial detention center in Astana),” Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 29 March 2025, <https://tmhelsinki.org/ru/article/b2d56821-9fab-420b-8206-fc200c72bab7>

⁵³ “Каракалпакский блогер Мустафа Турсынбаев умер в узбекской тюрьме (Karakalpak blogger Mustafa Tursynbaev dies in Uzbek prison),” RFERL Kazakh Service Azattyq, 20 February 2025, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/33321287.html>

⁵⁴ “Адвокат каракалпакского активиста Тажимуратова сообщил о жестоком избиении подзащитного в тюрьме (Karakalpak activist Tazhimuratov’s lawyer reports his client was brutally beaten in prison),” RFERL Uzbek Service Ozodlik, 15 May 2025, <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/advokat-karakalpaks-kogo-aktivista-tazhimuratova-soobschil-o-zhestokom-izbi-enii-ego-podzaschitnogo-v-tyurme/33414704.html>

⁵⁵ Mihra Rittmann, “Karakalpak Lawyer Imprisoned in Uzbekistan Alleges Torture, Again,” Human Rights Watch, 1 April 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/01/karakalpak-lawyer-imprisoned-uzbekistan-alleges-torture-again>

⁵⁶ “Uzbekistan: continued arbitrary detention of Dawletmurat Tajimuratov and new violations of his human rights (joint communication),” UN Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, 17 July 2025, <https://srdefenders.org/uzbekistan-continued-arbitrary-detention-of-dawletmurat-tajimuratov-and-new-violations-of-his-human-rights-joint-communication/>

A report from mid-July 2025, said the inmates who were harassing and assaulting Tazhimuratov were moved to a separate area of the prison, away from Tazhimuratov.⁵⁷

Uzbek authorities started the trial, in absentia, of Alga Karakalpakstan leader Aman Sagidullayev and the chairman of the Karakalpak diaspora in Kazakhstan, Nietbai Urazbayev, in March 2023.⁵⁸ The two were charged with helping organise the July 2022 unrest and in May 2023 they were both convicted. Saigidullayev was sentenced to 18 years in prison and Urazbayev to 12 years.⁵⁹

Urazbayev died of a heart attack in January 2024 in Almaty.⁶⁰ He had lived in Kazakhstan for nearly 20 years and obtained citizenship there in 2007. However, his citizenship was annulled in late 2023⁶¹ and Urazbayev feared he would be extradited to Uzbekistan.

Sagidullayev remains in exile in Europe.

Not Separatists, but Separate

President Mirziyoyev's government has done much to help improve the socio-economic and environmental situation in Karakalpakstan. Certainly, more than Islam Karimov did when he was Uzbekistan's president. However, the Uzbek government has shown little interest in promoting or preserving anything connected with Karakalpak culture.

⁵⁷ “Заключённых, угрожавших в колонии каракалпакскому активисту Тажимуратову, поселили отдельно (Prisoners who threatened Karakalpak activist Tazhimuratov in the colony were housed separately),” RFERL Kazakh Service Azattyq, 15 July 2025, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/zaklyuchyonnyh-ugrozhavshih-v-kolonii-zhizni-karakalpakskogo-aktivista-daul-etmurata-tazhimuratova-poselili-otdelno/33474733.html>

⁵⁸ “Лидер «Алга Каракалпакстан» является подсудимым по делу о нукусских событиях (Alga Karakalpakstan leader is a defendant in the Nukus events case),” Gazeta.uz, 25 March 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/03/25/court/>

⁵⁹ “Аманбай Сагидуллаев и Ниетбай Уразбаев заочно осуждены по делу о событиях в Нукусе (Amanbay Sagidullaev and Nietbay Urazbayev were convicted in absentia in the case of the events in Nukus),” Gazeta.uz, 10 May 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/05/10/court/>

⁶⁰ Nazerke Kurmangazinoва, “Глава каракалпакской диаспоры в Мангистауской области Ниетбай Уразбаев скончался в больнице (Head of Karakalpak Diaspora in Mangistau Region Nietbay Urazbayev Dies in Hospital),” Vlast.kz, 9 January 2024, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/58308-glava-karakalpakskoj-diaspory-v-mangistauskoj-oblasti-nietbaj-urazbaev-skoncalsya-v-bolnice.html>

⁶¹ “Ваше гражданство – наши проблемы (Your citizenship is our Problem),” Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, 5 December 2023, <https://bureau.kz/novosti/vashe-grazhdanstvo-nashi-problemy/>

There are some Karakalpaks who wish for an independent Karakalpakstan, but most of them understand that in the current situation that is nearly impossible. Ethnic Karakalpaks make up less than half the population of Karakalpakstan. Even if a free and fair referendum on secession was held, it is questionable whether the majority of the people in Karakalpakstan would vote in favour.

What the Karakalpaks in Karakalpakstan would like is to remain part of an Uzbekistan that recognizes and respects the culture of Karakalpaks and preserves the special political status that Uzbek authorities, and before them, Soviet authorities, gave to the Karakalpaks.

The thousands of protesters who came out in Karakalpakstan in late June and July 1, 2022, were not calling for independence. They were demanding the proposed changes to Uzbekistan's constitution that affected Karakalpakstan's status be canceled.

Since the July 2022 violence, it has become difficult, and risky, for Karakalpaks to publicly mention to publicly recognize differences between Karakalpaks and Uzbeks.

One example is Shingis Tayrov, a blogger from Karakalpakstan. Tayrov posted a video on Instagram on April 10, 2024,⁶² in which he asked why street signs and signs identifying buildings or tourist attractions in Karakalpakstan were written in Uzbek, Russian, and English, but not in Karakalpak. By April 16, there was a report that Tayrov was jailed for 15 days on charges that were not clear.⁶³

Karakalpakstan's place in Uzbekistan and the future of the Karakalpak people in Uzbekistan are unresolved issues, but currently there seems to be no efforts or discussions about this.

⁶² Shingis Tayrov Instagram account, shingis_tayrov, 10 April 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C5IL8Wctgi3/?igsh=d3Y3NHBwOGQ3em1r>

⁶³ "Karakalpak bloggers jailed over Instagram videos about Karakalpakstan and Karakalpak language," Freedom for Eurasia, 16 April 2024, <https://freedomforeurasia.org/karakalpak-bloggers-jailed-over-instagram-videos-about-karakalpakstan-and-karakalpak-language/>