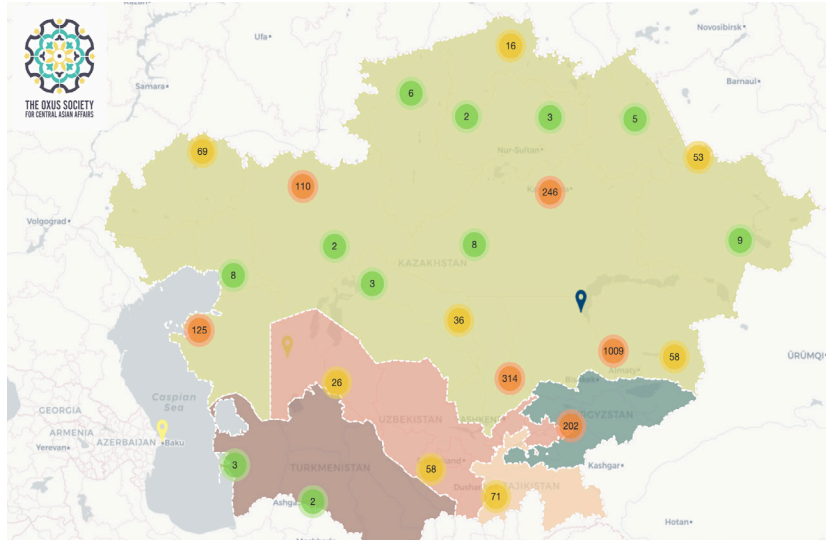


COVID-19, WORKER STRIKES AND THE FAILURE TO PROTECT CITIZENS: AN UPDATE ON THE CENTRAL ASIA PROTEST TRACKER

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As the third wave of Covid-19 hit Central Asia with the Delta variant spreading throughout the region in the first half of 2021, protests appear to be on the rise.¹ Over the first six months of 2021, the Central Asian Protest Tracker (CAPT) registered 954 protests in the region.² Protests in Kazakhstan make up more than 57 percent of all entries, while protests in Kyrgyzstan make up 30 percent of entries and protests in Uzbekistan make up more than 12 percent of entries. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan had only one rally each. 467 protests targeted national and local governments, 222 targeted local non-governmental actors, such as businesses and individuals, 168 targeted foreign actors, particularly the governments of China and Turkey, and 97 targeted the justice system.



With economies still recovering from the initial shock of the pandemic and new lockdown measures unlikely to be tolerated by local populations, governments cannot afford widespread restrictions. Issues related to income, lack of social protection, and low wages were catalysts of public discontent during the first half of 2021 throughout the region. Labor strikes demanding higher pay and better working conditions erupted in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Additionally, severe droughts due to extreme heat led to water shortages, resulting in a series of rallies and roadblocks by farmers from various parts of Kyrgyzstan. As temperatures rise, water shortages may become³ one of the most significant concerns in all five countries, fueling further tensions over scarce resources, especially in the border areas.

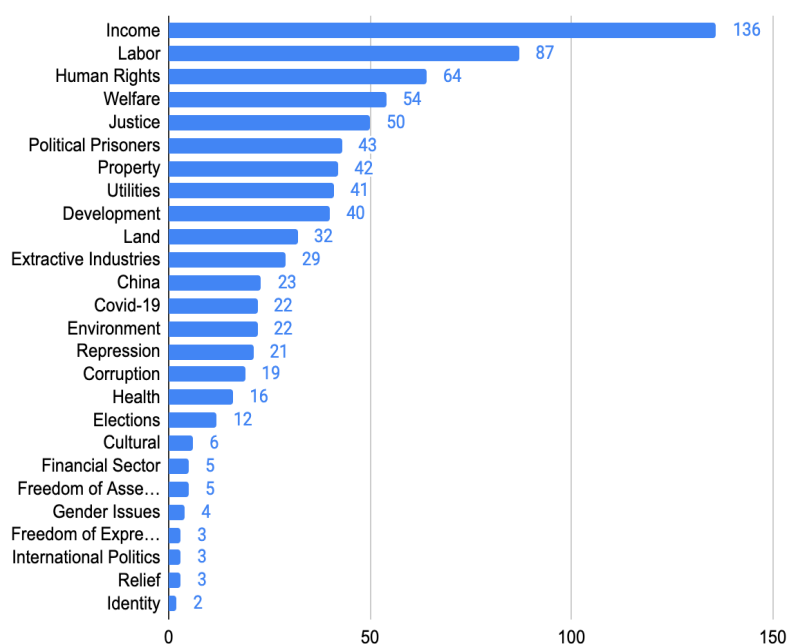
Human rights and justice-related issues are common themes of rallies in at least three countries this year, with protests related to ongoing transitions in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In the first half of 2021, Kyrgyzstan underwent significant political changes, with two referenda and three elections. These events were followed by a series of protests, primarily organized by candidates who were concerned about vote-buying and other administrative violations. Moreover, the shift of power led to the persecution of political figures and the new phenomenon «kusturuu,» whereby to escape jail, politicians «donate» funds to the government. However, despite paying money to the state, some politicians still end up in prison on corruption charges. Thus, supporters of arrested former MPs organized numerous rallies across the country. Anti-democratic protests are also on the rise. Groups have led rallies in Kyrgyzstan in opposition to those protesting against the new government. In Uzbekistan, protesters attacked a group of anime fans at the end of March, accusing them of supporting LGBT rights.

Kazakhstan - Labor Unrest and Demands for State Welfare Surge

Through the first half of 2021, Kazakhstan remained the country with the highest number of protests recorded in the CAPT, with 548 cases in total. However, to avoid skewing our data, we have omitted the 113 protest entries related to a prolonged rally in front of the Chinese consulate in Almaty, which we coded as separate events, from our analysis here.

Factors driving protests in the first half of 2021 included the “non-competitive” parliamentary elections in January 2021,⁴ as well as low wages and high inflation amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Similar to last year’s data, income remains one of the critical issues driving dissent; however, in 2021, it has been increasingly connected to labor conditions.⁵ Labor strikes and income-related rallies held by workers across the country made up more than 28 percent of all registered protest activities during the reporting period.

Protest by Issue, Kazakhstan



From 2018 to 2020, of all 780 protest activities in Kazakhstan, we registered only 30 strikes, while during the first half of 2021, the number of strikes related to income and labor issues increased sharply, reaching 39. In some cases, workers went on hunger strike or blocked roads demanding higher wages and improved working conditions. Workers from a variety of sectors went on strike, from

crane operators to bus drivers, medical personnel, ambulance drivers, schoolteachers and food couriers. According to local experts, cost-push inflation, weak legal protection of workers, and the lack of independent trade unions led to the labor strike surge.⁶ In June, the International Labor Organization criticized Kazakhstan for not complying with international labor rights conventions and called on the government to “stop judicial harassment practices of trade union leaders.”⁷

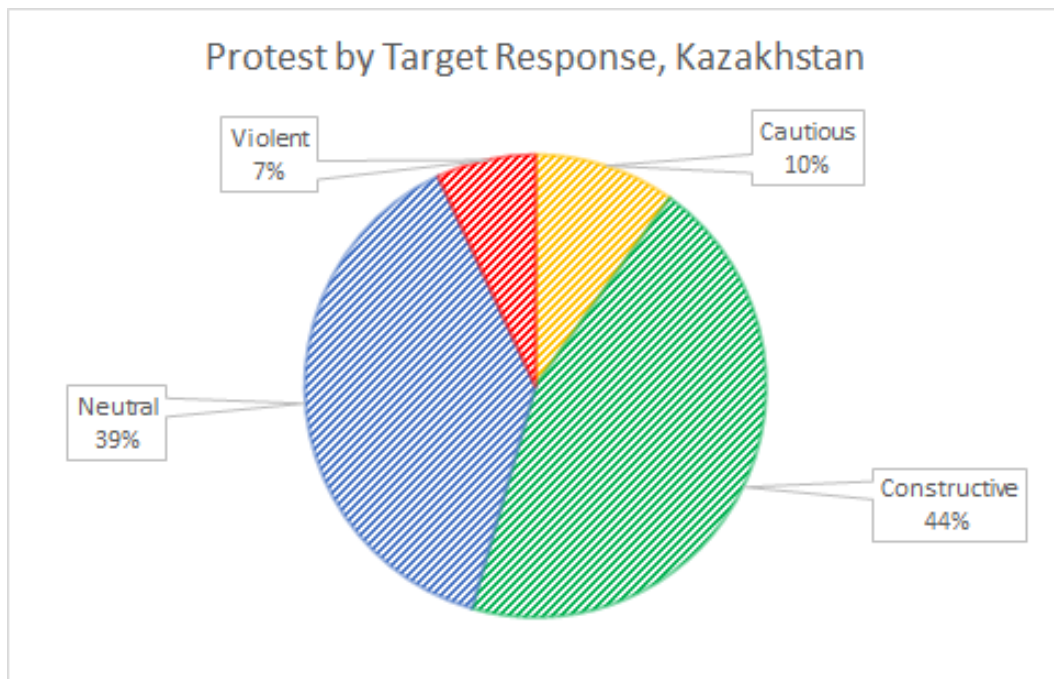
In some cases, pressure from workers led to concessions from companies’ management. After workers of the KMK Munai and AMK Munai oil companies in the Aktobe region went on strike for over a week, they reached a compromise with management.⁸ This success encouraged miners across the country to unionize and go on strikes.⁹ Most recently, at a strike in Zhanaozen, 1,200 employees of Kezbi oil company gathered demanding higher wages and improvements in working conditions.¹⁰ Earlier in 2013, 28 workers of the same company were hospitalized for amyl alcohol poisoning; two of the employees died.¹¹ Experts concluded that mass poisoning happened due to a violation of sanitary and epidemiological rules.¹² The epicenter for these protests is Zhanaozen, an industrial oil town notorious for the deadly 2011 suppression of strikers by the Kazakh government, in which a six-month-long labor dispute ended in the death of 16 protesters.¹³ Today, poorly paid workers still endure precarious conditions; however, companies seem more willing to compromise rather than escalating the situation.

Protests in Kazakhstan demonstrate that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing strains on the welfare system, with 54 protests linked to issues such as insufficient social security benefits and concerns around subsidized housing and mortgage repayments. Women, including mothers of multiple children and children with disabilities, have been at the forefront of many of these protests. For example on June 28, 2021, a group of women calling for improved social welfare benefits stormed the Kazakh Ministry of Industry and Infrastructural Development when they could not meet with the minister.¹⁴

From January to June 2021, CAPT registered 136 protests connected to China. Of these, 113 were part of an ongoing protest organized in front of the Chinese consulate in Almaty, calling for the release of ethnic Kazakh family members in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Although the number of recorded China-related protest entries has increased significantly, there has not been a notable surge in other China-related protests, with an increase from six in the second half of 2020 to 18 during the first

half of 2021.

While the number of unique China-related protests has not increased dramatically, they have been more brutally repressed. According to our data, about 21 percent of all arrests during the first half of 2021 were carried out during China-related protests. With so many arrests, this has led to an increase in protests by family members or friends who come to police and detention centers to demand their release for wrongful imprisonment. For example, on June 23, 2021, Zautkhan Tursyn slept¹⁵ in front of the Medeu district police station in Almaty, demanding the release of her son, Baibolot Kunbolatuly. Baibolot was arrested for 15 days after staging unsanctioned protests. He and his family have been seeking information about his younger brother, who disappeared in Xinjiang about three years ago.



There is a notable difference in target responses to different kinds of protests, based largely on who is protesting and the issues being raised. Our regression analysis demonstrated that protests targeting the government are associated with a 484 percent increase in the probability of a violent response from the target and a 52 percent decrease in the likelihood of a non-violent response. A link to an opposition group is associated with a 971 percent increase in the probability of the government's violent reaction and an 88 percent decrease in the probability of a constructive response. When involving China or political prisoners in Kazakhstan, however, the

government response is more likely to be aggressive or violent, with frequent police intimidation and arrests. For example, police have frequently broken up the 130-day protest in front of the Chinese consulate in Almaty, often arresting protesters.

Interestingly, when protests are related to labor and wages, police typically take a constructive approach without any arrests, and the company leadership meets with the workers to negotiate an agreement. Our regression analysis indicates that disruptive protests, such as strikes, are associated with a 99 percent decrease in the probability of a violent response and a 38 percent increase in the likelihood of a constructive reaction. Additionally, violent protests are associated with a 99 percent decrease in the probability of a violent response and a 115 percent increase in the likelihood of a constructive response. It is noteworthy that there were only 16 violent protests during the reporting period.

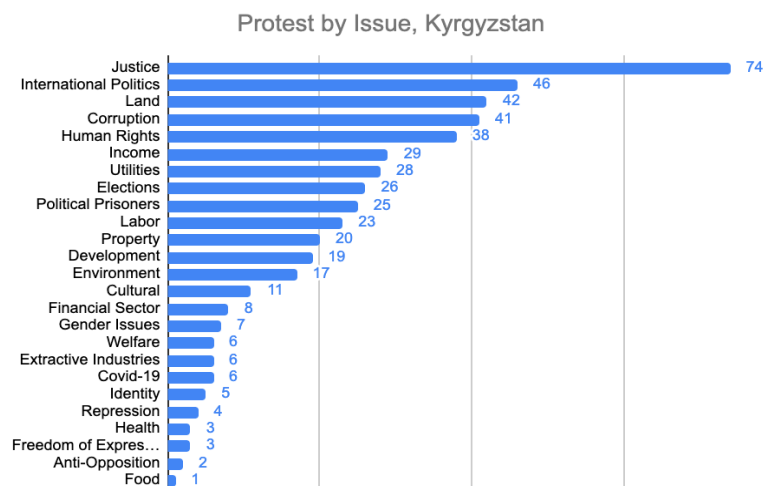
Overall, government responses to protests have become more aggressive and less accommodating since last year, with “violent” reactions rising from three percent to seven percent and “constructive” responses decreasing from 46 percent to 44 percent. One common theme, regardless of whether arrests are made, has been the use of “kettling” tactics by police, who surround the protest group in order to confine it to limited space. This tactic has become routine over the past year across all types of protests.

Kyrgyzstan - Calls for Domestic and International Justice Take to the Fore

During the first half of 2021, we recorded 285 protests in Kyrgyzstan. Slightly over one quarter of all protests in Kyrgyzstan targeted the country’s justice system, particularly with demands to hold accountable those responsible for the 2020 October events. The Kyrgyz Umutu (Hope of Kyrgyzstan) movement headed by Salamat Almazbek Uulu, whose members describe themselves as ‘participants and victims’ of the October 2020 events due to the violence inflicted by the security structures, demanded appropriation of a special status to the participants in the revolution.¹⁶ The movement members have repeatedly addressed¹⁷ Sadyr Japarov, asking that he punish those culpable for the October unrest and for the death of 19-year-old Umutbek Altynbek, who was killed by police. The protesters’ central demand was for former President Sooronbai Jeenbekov to be deprived of the ex-president status.¹⁸ The supporters of Zhenish Moldokmatov, the leader of the Turan political party, which is known for opposing the draft Constitution put forward by Sadyr Japarov, also targeted the Bishkek city and

regional courts.¹⁹ Moldokmatov's supporters demanded his release by displaying, among others, a poster calling to 'End the political repressions!' expressing disapproval of the charge for organizing mass disorder in October 2020.²⁰

The weekly marches for legality by Bashtan Bashta continued in the reported period. Along with major demands for the elimination of corruption across the country, participants of the marches protested against the release²¹ of the former deputy chief of the customs service Raimbek Matraimov and demanded the resolution of border issues²² and the protection of human rights²³ and freedom of speech. The march for legality started in October 2020 due to dissatisfaction with the April 2021 referendum and the constitutional amendments and continued until April 2021. On April 4, protesters went on the last march for the rule of law; Bashtan Bashta movement had achieved its initial goal of organizing marches each Sunday until April 11, the date of the referendum.²⁴



Similar statements addressing political persecution and corruption charges were voiced within the framework of a case surrounding the Kumtor gold mine, the country's largest export earner. A group of state officials, as well as former and current deputies, were interrogated on May 31 in relation to the Kumtor corruption case and placed in the State Committee for National Security's detention facility in Bishkek for a period of two months.²⁵ Supporters of the ex-Speaker Assylbek Jeenbekov and Deputy Torebay Zulpukarov demanded the politicians' release, claiming that they were politically persecuted.²⁶ At the same time, supporters of former Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov, who was also detained on May 31 on corruption charges, targeted the Bishkek district court demanding his

release.²⁷ A protest in former PM Omurbek Babanov's hometown, Talas, mustered around 3,000 of his supporters, making this one of the biggest protests in the reporting period in terms of number of people mobilized.

Human rights violations were also at the center of the protest movements in the first half of 2021, with a total of 38 protests. Many of these protests were at the intersection of human rights issues and international politics and concerned the abduction of Kyrgyz national and head of the "Sapat" International Educational Enterprise Orhan Inandi. In June 2021, students, parents, teachers and the alumni of the Turkish-Kyrgyz school network organized 12 protests targeting the Turkish Embassy in Bishkek,²⁸ the Government House,²⁹ the Old Square,³⁰ and the White House,³¹ demanding Kyrgyzstan's authorities find the missing Inandi. The protest movement culminated with the solitary protest of Inandi's spouse, Reihan Inandi on July 5 who stood in front of the White House with the poster "Where is Orhan Inandi?"³² The fears of the protesters who gathered in front of Manas International Airport³³ with the aim to prevent Inandi from being taken out of the country proved justified, as almost a month after the abduction, the Turkish president made a public statement pronouncing that the Kyrgyz-Turkish citizen was apprehended by Turkish intelligence.³⁴ The protest movement continued in July with the protesters demanding that the Kyrgyz government return Inandi to Kyrgyzstan after he appeared on Turkish television.³⁵

The idleness of the country's law enforcement in the case of Aizada Kanatbekova — a victim of marriage by abduction (also known as bride kidnapping) who was found strangled in April — caused a wave of protests related to continuous episodes of human rights violations, allegedly explained by the marriage by abduction tradition.³⁶ The police's failure to prevent the victim's death drove several hundred people to join the protests in Bishkek and Osh. On April 8, about 300 people gathered in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs building in Bishkek demanding the resignation of the minister of Internal Affairs, Ulan Niyazbekov.³⁷ On the same day protesters came to the City Internal Affairs Department in Osh demanding a meeting with the administration. Among the protesters were victims of domestic violence who complained about pervasive police negligence and inadequate law enforcement.³⁸

Elections for 28 city councils and 420 village councils on April 11 led to 29 different protests against 'dirty elections.'³⁹ Political party members and voters protested in Bishkek, Osh and other places with demands for annulment of the election. On the day after

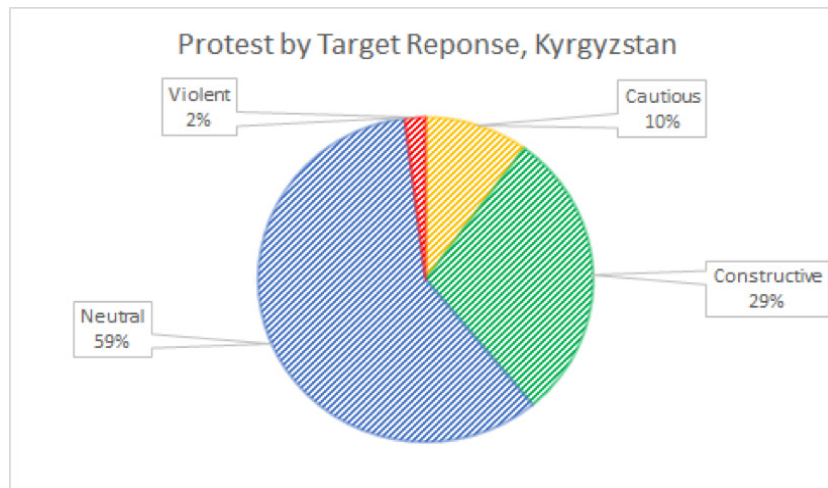
open casinos. According to the protesters, they disapproved of western NGOs that spread disinformation throughout the country. The demands by Japarov and Tashiev's supporters are a part of the emerging trend against NGOs' operations in Kyrgyzstan with the goal of preserving traditions. Voluntary people's guards, or *druzhinniki*, addressed similar demands on May 15, when 1500-2000 people gathered on the Old Square in what was explained as an 'act of guarding peace in the country.'

There were 52 protests related to issues of income and labor, including the working conditions of bazaar business owners, demands for higher salaries and trade union representation. The largest income-related protest in the first half of 2021 was a strike by 500 marshrutka drivers in Bishkek demanding an increase in fares to 15 soms. Problems with utilities — in particular, a major water shortage — led to a significant number of protests, with 28 protests during the reporting period connected to utilities. A heat wave in Central Asia caused a serious drought in Kyrgyzstan this summer. Farmers, particularly in the Chui oblast, held repeated protests demanding that the government resolve the water crisis. The largest recorded protest took place on June 14, when around 300 farmers demonstrated outside of the House of Government in Bishkek. While government officials met with protesters and offered to release a limited amount of water to the farmers, there is little they can do to resolve the situation when water levels in rivers and reservoirs are far below normal. Protests over the situation have therefore continued, including several roadblocks staged by farmers in late June. The water shortage has also hurt crop yields, leading to a rise in prices for food and other important agricultural goods, such as hay for livestock. While the rising prices have yet to lead to any recorded protests in Kyrgyzstan, continued price growth and economic instability may spark protests later this year, especially as some farmers predict a catastrophic total loss of crops. Moreover, the water crisis may lead to shortages of electricity and associated protests, as 90% of Kyrgyzstan's electricity comes from hydropower.

Disputes over the border delimitation between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the Fergana Valley erupted violently in April — resulting in the deaths of at least 55 people and displacement of 58,000, mostly on the Kyrgyz side — and prompted several protests in Bishkek. A crowd of roughly 1,500 people gathered in Ala-Too Square, demanding that the government begin mobilizing conscripts and order the military to attack Tajik soldiers. Some protesters demanded weapons and asked to be sent to Batken to fight. Another contingent of roughly 150 protesters expressed discontent with Kyrgyz political leaders and demanded that President Sadyr Japarov and Speaker of the Jogorku Kenesh Talant Mamytov appear in public to address the crisis. Though Japarov's presidential campaign channeled populist and nationalist sentiments, his response to the border crisis remained muted. His options are limited by geopolitical and economic realities, as Kyrgyzstan has little leverage to extract reparations from Tajikistan, and its government is already so deeply in debt that it will likely struggle to compensate its citizens for their losses.

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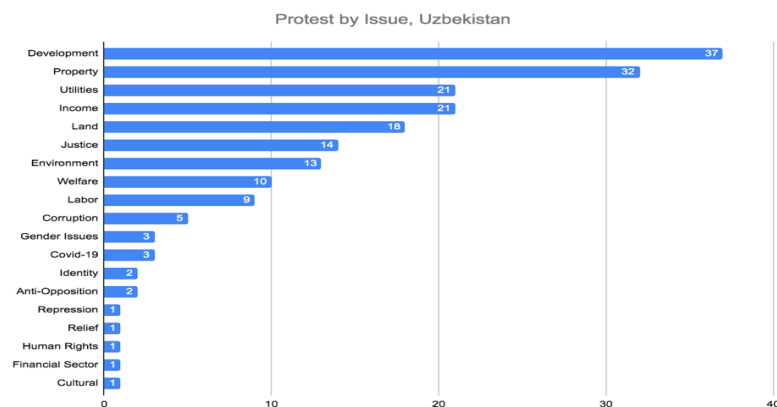
The hostilities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border have subsided, but broader concerns about Central Asia's border demarcation remain. In April, at least six protests took place in Kyrgyzstan in connection with a proposed land swap with Uzbekistan. The Kyrgyz and Uzbek governments heralded the agreement as a way to resolve all remaining border issues. But Kyrgyz villagers in the Jalal-Abad and Osh regions strongly opposed the deal because it would transfer 50 hectares of land near the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. In one case, several hundred protesters expressed their dissatisfaction with the plan and demanded a meeting with GKNB Chairman Kamchybek Tashiev, who had led the negotiations. As border delimitation talks continue, we can expect more protests by border communities who are most affected by, but not involved in, the negotiations.



Almost all protests (98%) were met with non-violent responses, with “unknown” and no response accounting for 59%. Almost a third of the protests received a constructive response, mostly when the protesters targeted local government, national government or businesses. This continues the pattern in the previous reporting period (September-December 2020), when Kyrgyzstan had the lowest constructive response rate in the region, with only 29% of protests receiving a constructive response (versus 44% for Kazakhstan and 46% for Uzbekistan). During the first half of 2021, Kyrgyzstan also had the lowest rate of violent response, only 2%, as compared to 7% for Kazakhstan and 4% for Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan - Utility Disputes, Urban Development Projects and Disagreements Over Property Continue to Drive Unrest

During the first half of 2021, Uzbekistan experienced a total of 119 protests. Continuing a trend seen in previous CAPT data, urban development and property issues accounted for more than half of protests. Illegal construction projects, land grabbing and destruction of property as part of urban regeneration have pushed locals to protest against private companies or government officials. One woman attempted self-immolation in front of the Samarkand regional leader's office, in response to the destruction of her property. To prevent construction projects, civilians have attacked building machinery, held rallies and appealed to the local government. These protests result from the unregulated culture of construction in Uzbekistan. Lack of local consent and the absence of construction permits indicate the state's minimal involvement in the construction sector, leaving locals exposed to an exploitive construction sector.



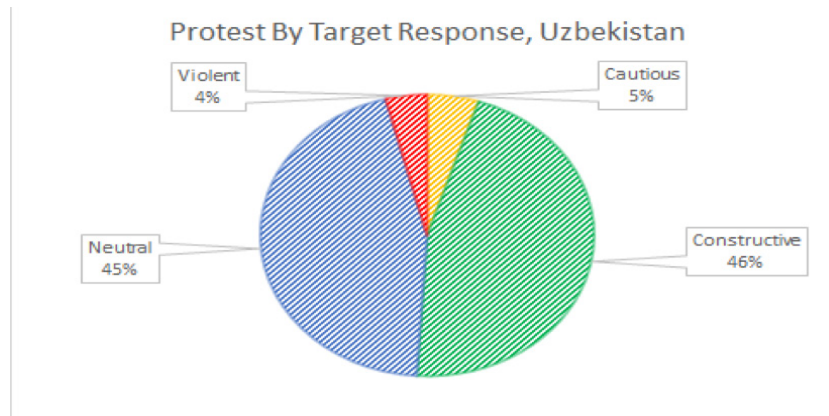
Behind development and property issues, lack of utilities, such as shortages of gas, electricity and water supplies, often lasting weeks in the coldest season of the year in Uzbekistan, have driven protestors to express their discontentment at local government buildings or by blocking important roads. On January 13, about 50 drivers gathered on Chorsu Square in Namangan to protest against liquified petroleum gas shortages in the city. Protesters complained that gas stations were running out of fuel due to excessive demand. The authorities explained that the situation was due to technical issues involving supply infrastructure. Similarly, residents of Urgench blocked a road to express discontent over a gas and electricity shortage.

The regional Governor Farhad Ermanov met with the protesters and promised to install new electricity supply lines. Uzbekistan's energy infrastructure needs to modernize to account for today's electricity demand. On June 25, the World Bank approved "The Electricity Sector Transformation And Resilient Transmission Project" through a combined \$423 million in credit from the International Development Association and the Green Climate Fund, to revamp Uzbekistan's power infrastructure.

Twenty-one protests were linked to income and nine to labor during the first half of 2021, with oil refinery workers, healthcare workers, employees of the public management sector and a brick manufacturing company going on strike. Most of the strikes took place in the petroleum sector, where employees protested delayed wage payments and layoffs. Fergana Oil Refinery, a leading enterprise in the gas sector, was the target of a major labor-related protest in January. Furthermore, the government is particularly concerned in the health sector strike, where paramedics protested on the premises of the local ambulance station in the city of Shahrisabz calling for the country's president to intervene in their dispute with the health authorities regarding extra pay for their service during the pandemic.

The majority of protests related to the environment are cases of residents protesting against the closure of parks and removal of trees as part of ongoing urban regeneration and beautification. For example, on January 13, about 200 residents of Karshi protested against the city government's plan to destroy 12 hectares of park and build an industrial zone in its place. This type of activism has been emboldened by the Presidential Moratorium on Deforestation, which prohibited cutting down trees for the purposes of redevelopment.

As the Mirziyoyev government has relaxed repression, new opportunities for expressing opinions publicly have emerged, not all of them expressing liberal values. On March 28, a violent group of protesters rallied in Tashkent against LGBT activists in the country, attempting to physically attack two of the protesters present. The crowd approached a gathering of Japanese animation and K-pop fans. Although no injuries were reported, twelve individuals were detained after the event and charged with hooliganism. Later that day, a well-known critic of the government and LGBT ally, blogger Miraziz Bazarov, was brutally beaten, with the government showing an unwillingness to investigate his case.



Most reactions to development and environmental protests were constructive, with the government promising to satisfy the demands of protesters in 46% of cases. As indicated above, 45% of the responses were neutral, meaning that most of these protests have seen no clear resolution of their grievances. Most of the labor strikes have not been resolved yet, as there has been no response on the part of private oil refinery companies.

Conclusion

While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have largely been able to navigate political unrest over the past year, they now face mounting protest movements related to more fundamental issues of income, labor, and provision of services, all of which have been exacerbated by Covid-19. As Uzbekistan continues to slowly open up and develop its economy, citizens are pushing back, creating a challenge for the new government seeking to rebrand its image. All three countries have sought to address these “bread-and-butter” issue protests constructively. However, if the size and frequency of these protests continue to rise and the governments do nothing to seriously address their causes, these protests could quickly spiral into mass movements that produce less benign government responses.

Faced with this prospect, there are some signs that the space for voicing political discontent is coming under fire. Unlike its responses to labor protests, the Kazakh government has reacted harshly to more protests calling for the release of political prisoners in Kazakhstan and China, setting a clear limit on what level of discontent it is willing to entertain. Developments in Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, signal a worrying shift against civil society groups and free speech under the new Japarov administration. With the effects of Covid-19 continuing to be felt across the region and ongoing transitions in three countries, we can expect protests to play a central role in the region’s politics going forward.

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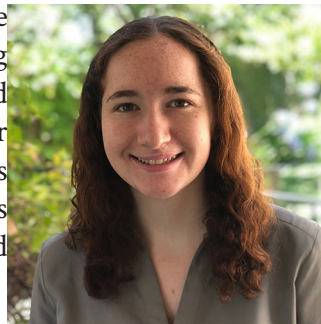


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