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# **IFEX Advocacy Action News**

*A bi-monthly bulletin for IFEX members to promote campaigns and share advocacy information*

## **FOCUS ON MEMBER ADVOCACY**

### **From the symbols to the streets, campaigning gets creative in Central Asia**

By Zaynah Khanbhai, IFEX Outreach Coordinator

Cartoonists and writers are raising awareness of free expression issues in Central Asia this week by competing in essay and caricature contests launched by IFEX members and partners in the region to commemorate World Press Freedom Day.

The third annual contest is part of an advocacy strategy by free expression organisations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that has actually revived the disappearing art of editorial cartooning.

“Editorial cartoons play an important role in public debate but they have been disappearing from newspaper pages across Central Asia in recent years, as publishers and cartoonists have feared reprisals such as intimidation and harassment for publishing them,” says Tamara Kaleyeva, Executive Director of Kazakhstan-based IFEX member Adil Soz. “We launched this campaign to celebrate political cartooning and its role in the political arena.”

Free expression organisations including Adil Soz, Public Association of Journalists in Kyrgyzstan, National Association of Independent Media in Tajikistan and Batken Media Resource Centre in Kyrgyzstan have collaborated to make the essay-writing and cartooning campaign regional in scope. The contests are judged at the regional level by appointed panels and the works of the winners are published in calendars and journals that are widely distributed.

These groups have also used other creative tactics to raise media and public awareness about free expression issues in their respective countries, as well as to create solidarity across the media communities. Last year, in a symbolic gesture to demonstrate the deteriorating state of free expression, they planted cacti. The previous year, Adil Soz and partners in Kazakhstan planted oak trees dedicated to the “Solidarity of Journalists” to speak to journalists about the need to unite to promote the right to freedom of expression.

In Central Asia, overt protests and demonstrations are the least common form of activism. Civil society organizations almost never appear on the streets for fear of the repercussions associated with direct forms of activism.

However, Adil Soz and its local partners in Kazakhstan have recently shown their readiness and courage to use more direct advocacy tactics.

On 10 March 2009, free expression activists demonstrated in front of the City Court in the capital city Almaty to protest the exorbitant fine of 300 000 000 tenge (approx. \$1,989,700 USD) imposed on journalist Almas Kusherbayev for moral defamation. The fine is the highest ever brought against a journalist or media house in Kazakhstan. Kusherbayev was fined following complaints brought forward by a Member of Parliament after he wrote an article about the causes behind increasing grain prices in the country.

The brave and unorthodox decision to organise the protest was the result of a meeting between newspaper editors and free expression organisations, including Adil Soz, who were concerned by

the rising trend of moral defamation cases being brought against journalists and thought it necessary and urgent to take a more direct form of action.

Despite the knowledge that they would likely go to jail for their outspoken advocacy, and against the orders of their legal advisors, Adil Soz spoke out for the rights of this journalist while surrounded by armed national security troops. The organisation also raised international attention to the case by issuing an alert through the IFEX Action Alerts Network.

Concerted media coverage combined with the organisers' effective mobilisation of stakeholders including intergovernmental bodies, politicians and all prominent media houses, ensured that the armed forces could not take action against the protesters and contributed to the event's success.

Beyond raising public attention and awareness of the issue in Kazakhstan locally, regionally, and internationally, the campaign also played a role in strengthening journalists' solidarity around free expression rights.

The organisers collectively commented on the determination they felt to bring about change through protests, "...we might be losers in terms of official law but we will be winners in the long run, because we crossed the barrier that made us fear justice and real freedom and nothing will stop us now."

- Click [here](#) to read the Adil Soz alert on the Kuserbayev case