

# “If I were told that I only have one day left to live, I would spend it fighting for human rights.”

Friday 27 March 2015

## Portrait of Mutabar Tadjibaeva, Uzbek human rights defender.

**“If I were told that I only have one day left to live, I would spend it fighting for human rights,”** says Mutabar Tadjibaeva, President of the organization [Fiery Hearts Club](#). The 52-year-old Uzbek journalist and activist arrived in France in 2009 as a political refugee. She is no longer welcome in her native country, which has been governed for a quarter of a century by the dictator Islam Karimov. In Uzbekistan, Mutabar investigated drug trafficking, corruption and human rights violations. She endured threats, prison, torture and rape; her fight came at a high price.

In 2002, while this activist was fighting to make publicly known the case of Alimuhammad Mamadaliev, who had been tortured and killed by the police, she herself ended up behind bars for several days. In April 2005, she was kidnapped by secret service agents and subjected to horrific treatment. These men would never worry about having to answer for their deeds. But even in the face of such injustice, Mutabar Tadjibaeva continued her activism and journalism until she was imprisoned three years later, on 7 October 2005, just before boarding a plane headed for Dublin where she was to participate in an international conference on human rights. She was arrested by police and, a year later, sentenced to eight years in prison, where she was subjected to torture. She was accused of engaging in illegal activities against the State during demonstrations where several hundred people had lost their lives in May 2005 in Andijan, an industrial city. It is clear to Mutabar that her arrest was for purely political reasons. She was one of many victims of State repression that followed the events of 2005.

**“I know very well what prison in Uzbekistan is like and the torture. That is why I have decided to devote my life to fighting for human rights. When I was in jail, I dreamt that one day I would be free. I would tell the prison guards that I would get out of there and write a book on what I had lived through,”** she recalls. On 18 May 2008, while still in prison, she was granted the Martin Ennals Award for human rights defenders. She was released a few months later and, on 10 December of that same year, Mutabar Tadjibaeva came to Paris where she accepted the Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité Award on behalf of the Fiery Hearts Club. Banned from Uzbekistan for almost ten years, the organisation took shelter in France in 2011. It will celebrate the 15th year of its existence this year. Every day, dozens of people come to her in search of assistance. She seeks out lawyers and funding, prepares reports and files individual complaints to the UN. Despite the modest means at her disposal and a state of health weakened by the torture she suffered, Mutabar wants to help those who are in the same situation as she was in ten years earlier. Her wish is that human rights defenders take more of an interest in the situation in Uzbekistan. Mutabar Tadjibaeva has enjoyed the support of FIDH, and her organisation is now officially a member. **“It is thanks to the support of the FIDH that I was able to keep my promise, that is, write my book entitled “Prisoner of the Island of Torture.” I worked with an Uzbek journalist and it is thanks to those recordings that I was able to tell my story. Otherwise, it would have been too hard psychologically,”** Mutabar recalls. In the book, which has been published in Uzbek, Russian, French, and English, she shares her memories of prison and decries the cruelty of the regime.□□

For Mutabar, the challenge lies not in Karimov's departure, but in regime change. ***"His departure could set off a war among the clans. The country is corrupt, there is no respect for the law. Karimov the dictator is not the only one to blame for the fact that people are being killed in prisons and tortured; the politicians who support the regime are also to blame. I want Uzbekistan to become a democratic country and dissidents like me to be able to return there and live,"*** she said. However, as Mutabar sees it, a return to her country is not within the realm of the possible.

On 29 March, Islam Karimov will be running for President for the fourth time, thereby violating Article 90 of the Constitution, which does not allow more than two terms. Mutabar Tadjibaeva and her friends have set up a virtual electoral commission to organise a vote on the Internet. This alternative platform has rejected the candidacy of the president.

***"When I decided to come to France as a political refugee,"*** she concluded, ***"I was afraid that I would not be able to do anything for my country remotely. But, now I see that if you are motivated and supported, anything is possible."***