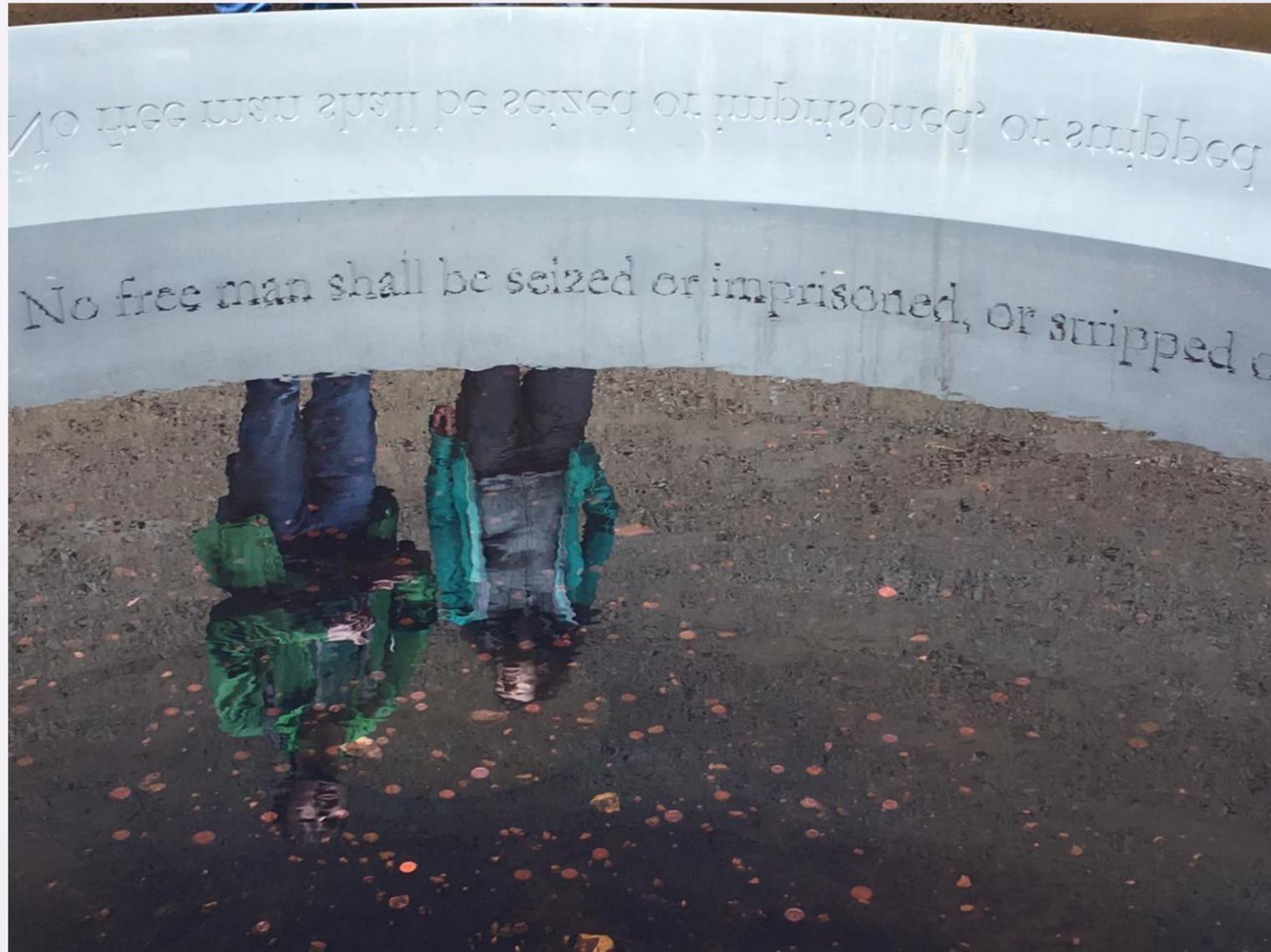


FREEDOM NOW



Annual Report
2019



INTRODUCTION

Freedom Now is dedicated to protecting human rights and rule of law by working to eliminate the politically motivated harassment and imprisonment of those who exercise their fundamental rights.

Freedom Now fulfils this objective through:

-  pro bono legal representation of prisoners of conscience;
-  international advocacy initiatives;
-  coordination and capacity building of stakeholders; and
-  focused research and analysis of human rights issues, repressive laws, and government tactics.

A Letter to our Supporters

In 2019, with your commitment and support, we have continued down the path to ending arbitrary detention and global repression. Looking back, our work has made an impact in ways I could not have imagined when I joined Freedom Now's board in 2014. In 2019 -

Together, we represented 38 prisoners of conscience from 14 countries.

Together, we were the voice of an activist protesting concentration camps in China, a woman demanding equal rights in Saudi Arabia, and a journalist exposing corruption in Vietnam.

Together, we won five cases at the United Nations regarding arbitrary detention of prisoners of conscience in violation of international law and we submitted four more.

Together, we helped secure the release of five prisoners of conscience in Iran, Kazakhstan, Mauritania, Rwanda, and Vietnam. For the first time in nearly six years, Mohammed Mkhaitir was able to walk free, unburdened by a looming death sentence.

As you will see from the stories that follow, 2019 was another landmark year for Freedom Now. Thank you for support throughout. Our clients will be forever grateful.

Gregory McGillivary
Board Member
Freedom Now



BY THE NUMBERS: WHO WE'VE HELPED IN 2019



13

Politicians imprisoned for roles in opposition



9

Imprisoned for political beliefs or civil activism



5

Journalists imprisoned for reporting



5

Human rights defenders imprisoned for advocacy



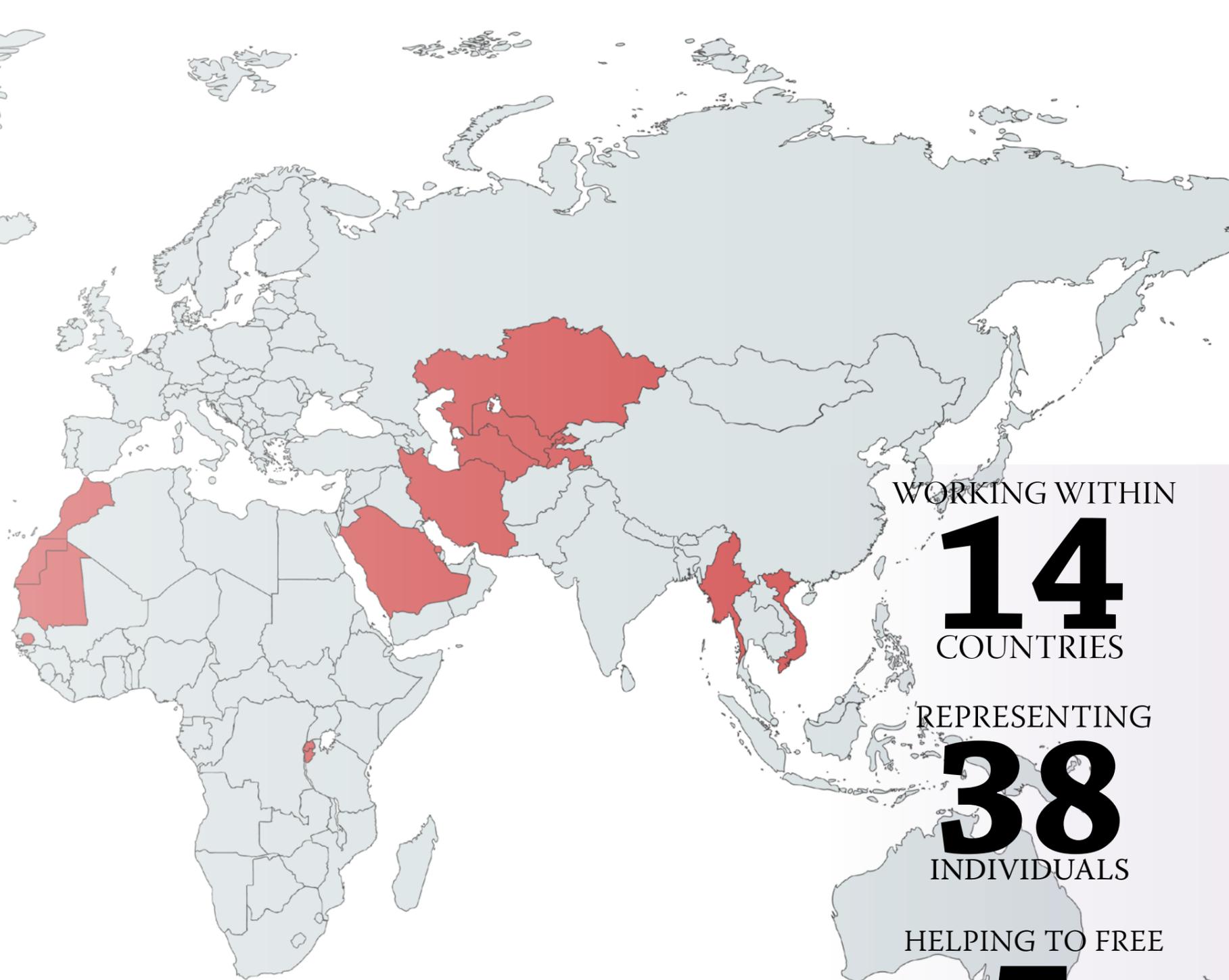
5

Individuals imprisoned for religious beliefs, practices or advocacy



1

Lawyer imprisoned for defending human rights



PROTECTING THE RULE OF LAW

Freedom Now represents prisoners of conscience before international human rights tribunals. We bring legal claims against repressive governments that stifle the human rights and fundamental freedoms of activists, journalists, minorities, and lawyers, among others. Through our legal work, we obtain redress for victims of wrongful detention and other abuses, such as torture. Our efforts not only free individuals, they strengthen respect for international human rights law and institutions.

Freedom Now, along with our pro bono legal teams, won five cases at the United Nations in 2019 for clients in Iran, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. We prepared and submitted four more briefs on behalf of clients in Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Vietnam and often liaised with the UN on developing situations regarding our other clients, both imprisoned and recently released.



UN Headquarters, Geneva

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Pro bono hours
donated by law firms last year: **3,244**
(approx \$2.4 million)

Number of violations of our
clients' rights found by tribunals: **82**

PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

We mobilize powerful voices by engaging with key institutions, government officials, and citizens. Our efforts target multiple pressure points, making it more difficult for autocratic governments to escape scrutiny.



In October 2016, Tajikistan sentenced lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov to 28 years in prison for providing legal assistance to opposition politicians.

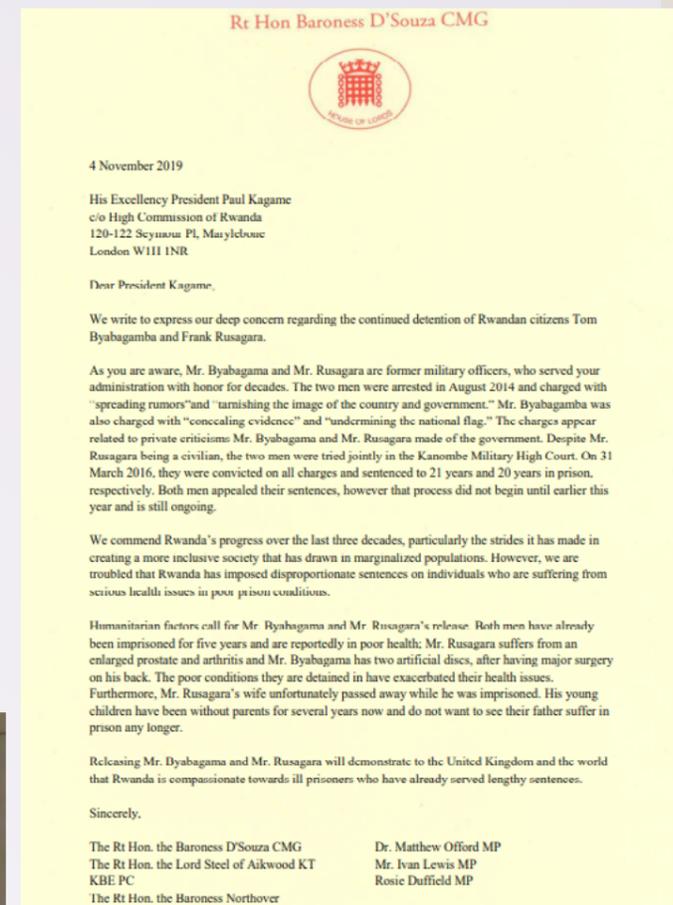
In August 2019, based on a nomination submitted by Freedom Now, the Council of Europe announced Yorov as one of three finalists for the prestigious Vaclav Havel Prize for Human Rights. The distinguished honor recognized Yorov for his tireless efforts promoting human rights and the rule of law in Tajikistan for over a decade. The announcement came shortly after Freedom Now won a case on Yorov's behalf before the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which found that Yorov's imprisonment violated international law.

Photos: Jamshed Yorov



Imagine sending a text message to a friend complaining about your president. Days later you are arrested and face two decades in prison. This was the fate of former military officers Frank Rusagara and Tom Byabagamba. The two men have been imprisoned in Rwanda since August 2014, cut off from their families and still awaiting the decision of an appeals court. Freedom Now has mobilized significant pressure on the Rwandan government during Frank and Tom's detention. Most recently, we coordinated a letter from six members of the U.K. Parliament, which drew a direct response from the Minister of Justice and President Paul Kagame himself.

Photo: Frank Rusagara appears in court (The Rwandan)



PUBLICIZING OUR CLIENTS' STORIES

Freedom Now represents individuals with compelling, but largely unknown stories. Buzurgmehr Yorov is a Tajik lawyer serving 28 years in prison for doing his job - representing opposition politicians facing fabricated charges. Attracting attention to his case, and others like it, is essential to winning his freedom. Freedom Now tells the stories of our clients through the media, giving them a voice that was lost.

The screenshot shows the ifex website interface. The article title is "Commitment, perseverance, and ingenuity: Changing The Gambia's climate of impunity". Below the title, there is a sub-header "The Gambia | Impunity". The article is dated 21 February 2019. A photograph shows a group of people holding a banner that reads "WAJA STOP ASSASSINATIONS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS AND THE PRESS SHED LIGHT ON THE ASSASSINATION OF DEYDAH YARA". Below the photo, the text describes a campaign to counter the culture of impunity under former Gambian president Yahya Jammeh.

The screenshot shows a The Diplomat article. The title is "Fighting for Tajikistan's Jailed Lawyers". The byline is "by Marc Gottridge" dated January 23, 2019. The article text describes how Tajik lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov was arrested and imprisoned for representing opposition politicians. A photograph shows Buzurgmehr Yorov in a courtroom setting. The article mentions that he was sentenced to 23 years in prison in October 2016, which was later increased to 28 years.

The screenshot shows a news article with the title "Tajikistan prison riot kills prominent opposition members". The sub-headline reads "Tajik government blames ISIL inmates for Vahdat prison riot in which 32 people, including three guards, are killed." The article is dated 21 May 2019. A photograph shows a group of people, including a woman in a green headscarf, reacting to news of the riot. Below the photo, there is a caption: "Relatives of inmates react to reports about deadly riots inside a prison in the city of Vahdat, Tajikistan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty/ via Reuters)". At the bottom, there are links to "MORE ON TAJIKISTAN" and "Iran renews nuclear deal ultimatum at Tajikistan summit".

The screenshot shows an RFA article. The title is "International law firm sends a letter to the UN demanding that Vietnam release Phan Kim Khanh". The article is dated 2019-09-17. A photograph shows Phan Kim Khanh, a student activist. Below the photo, there is a caption: "Student activist Phan Kim Khanh. Courtesy of Phan Kim Khanh's Facebook". The article text states that human rights organization Freedom Now and international law firm Dechert LLP filed an application to the United Nations Working Group (UN) on arbitrary detention on September 16, 2017, demanding the release of Phan Kim Khanh.

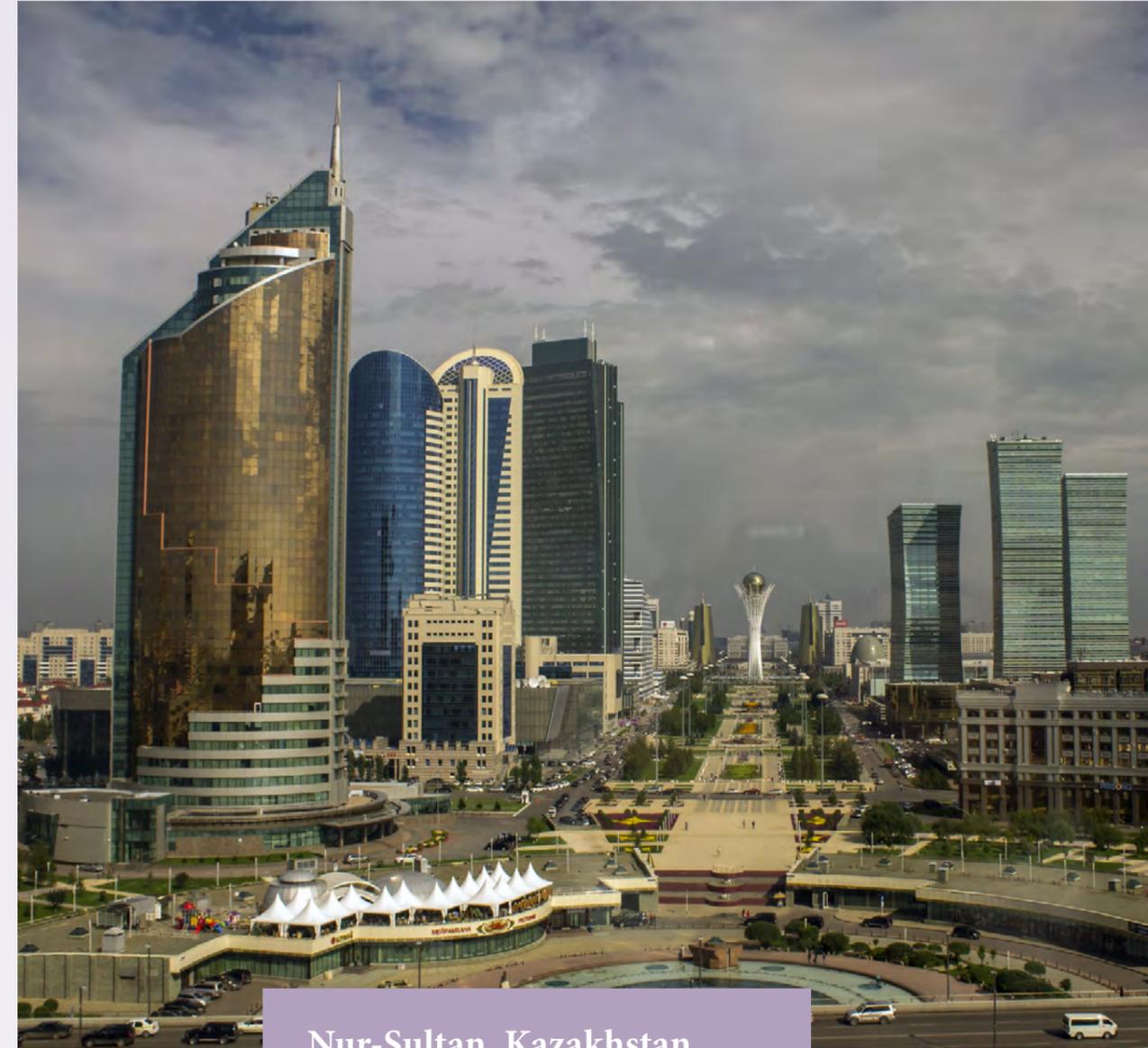
PROFILE OF A COUNTRY IN FOCUS: KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan spans over one million square miles, from the vast, open steppe in the west to the mountainous Tian Shan in the east. It is an oil rich nation with an economy that has far outpaced its Central Asian neighbors. However, its government's record for committing human rights abuses and lack of respect for international norms is similarly notorious to that of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In its 2019 report on freedom in the world, Freedom House graded Kazakhstan as "Not Free," finding that the country's aggregate freedom score is 22 out of a possible 100.

Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled Kazakhstan for nearly three decades until his abrupt resignation in March 2019. His ostensible abdication promised to open a new chapter in the country's history, ushering in human rights reforms that were abandoned or ignored for a generation.

The only noticeable change in Kazakhstan nearly a year after Nazarbayev's departure is the revised name of the capital city: Nur-Sultan. The new regime has continued the old policies in regards to human rights. Activists face harassment, criminal penalties, and imprisonment for challenging government policies. In protests around the June 2019 presidential elections, more than 900 protestors were arrested. Newly-elected president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev promised reforms to lighten restrictions on freedom of assembly, but arrests continued throughout the year. In an absurd twist, even protestors who carried blank signs were detained by police, perhaps frightened by the mere possibility of dissent.

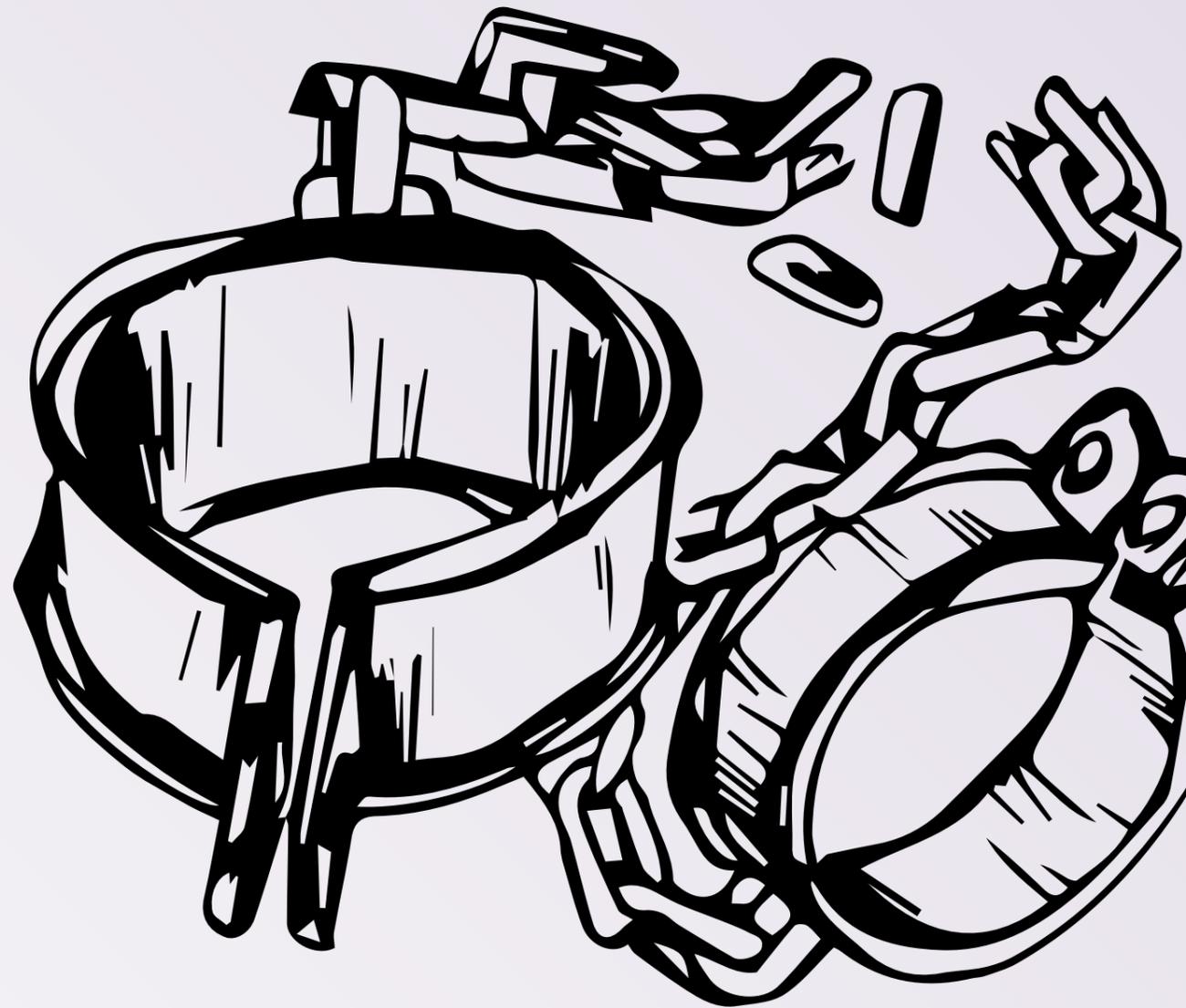
The government is particularly sensitive to activism related to the silent cultural genocide taking place in neighboring China's western province of Xinjiang. At least two million people are being kept in "re-education" camps, where they are forced to study propaganda for hours each day, subjected to torture, and made compliant with medication. A large contingent of those held in the camps are ethnic Kazakhs. President Tokayev's administration has resorted to using vague national security charges against activists campaigning against the camps, claiming such actions are sowing national discord.



Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan

Photo: Ben Dalton, Flickr

PRESERVING
FREEDOM



PUTTING AN END TO CHINA'S CONCENTRATION CAMPS

China-born Kazakh activist Serikzhan Bilash has spent years documenting the human rights violations in Xinjiang. He has compiled interviews from hundreds of former detainees, creating an invaluable resource for the international network of civil society organizations advocating for the closure of the camps. Serikzhan is an active critic of the camps and he has not shied away from calls to action. He made one such call to a group of Uyghurs in February 2019, urging them to supply information to the outside world. The next month Serikzhan was arrested for inciting discord and faced a seven year prison sentence.

In July 2019, on the same day Serikzhan's trial started, Freedom Now filed a petition with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on his behalf. He was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by the U.S. House of Representative's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Two weeks later, the government released Serikzhan. Unfortunately, the conditions of his release restrict his freedom of movement restricted and he is banned from conducting advocacy for seven years.

China casts a long shadow over Central Asia. In 2020, Freedom Now will continue its efforts to bring an end to China's concentration camps and defend civil society in the region.



Serikzhan Bilash awaits a court hearing in June 2019.

Photo: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty



Mohammed Mkhaitir after his release from detention in July 2019.

Photo: Eugenie Baccot, La Croix

PROTECTING A LIFE IN MAURITANIA

This year, Freedom Now achieved a momentous victory in one of our longest running cases. Mohammed Mkhaitir was arrested in Mauritania in January 2014. He was sentenced to execution by firing squad after publishing a blog post criticizing religious justification for slavery, a practice that is still prevalent in his home country.

An appeal court finally struck down his death sentence in November 2017, commuting it to two years. However, as soon as the verdict was read, rancorous protests broke out in the court room, calling for Mohammed's death. Mohammed, his lawyers, and the judges were escorted out of the building under police protection. Almost immediately, the government placed Mohammed in an unknown location, ostensibly for his own safety, but with extremely limited communication with the outside world. He was kept in a house for 24 hours a day as his health and mental state worsened.

Freedom Now, our law firm partner Dechert LLP, and NGO colleagues launched public and private initiatives to secure Mohammed's release from legal limbo. Finally, in the early morning hours of July 29, Mohammed was taken to France where he has now started a new life.



Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee prior to her arrest in September 2014.

Photo: Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee

PUNISHED FOR A DIARY

Tucked away in Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee's personal diary was a tale she penned as a catharsis, with no intention of publishing. This all changed when Iranian authorities arrived at the home of Golrokh and her husband Arash Sadeghi, a well-known activist, in September 2014. Police ransacked the couple's home and found Golrokh's diary, which contained a fictional handwritten story about a female character who watches *The Stoning of Soraya M*, a 2008 Persian-language film depicting the true story of a woman stoned to death for adultery. The character is upset by Soraya's fate and burns the Qur'an in an emotionally charged moment.

Golrokh's act of expression was interpreted as "insulting Islamic sanctities" by the authorities. Coupled with charges of "spreading propaganda against the system" for Facebook posts as well as possession of alleged propaganda in her home, Golrokh was sentenced to six years in prison. Freedom Now filed a petition with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in April 2018 on her behalf. Our advocacy focused on bringing attention to the terrible conditions she faced in prison. Because Golrokh refused to stop criticizing the Iranian regime from behind bars she was the victim of reprisals, including beatings by prison guards and a transfer to a different prison.

Golrokh was released from prison in April 2019, but almost immediately the Iranian government charged her with new crimes for her activism in prison. In September 2019, she was sentenced to two and half years in prison, but has not yet begun serving the sentence.

PROMOTING REFORM

It took only 10 days for the Vietnamese government to decide that Doan Huy Chuong, Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung, and Do Thi Minh Hanh were a threat to national security. The three were arrested in February 2010 after providing assistance to striking workers at a garment factory and sentenced to up to nine years in prison. During their imprisonment, the activists were repeatedly beaten, subjected to solitary confinement, and suffered from ill-health.

After nine years of imprisonment, Nguyen was the last of the group to be set free. Do was released early in June 2014, followed by Doan in February 2017. We repeatedly engaged Vietnamese and U.S. policymakers on this case, compelling both the U.K. Parliament and the U.S. House of Representatives to call for the release of the activists. Our efforts at the UN resulted in the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention finding Vietnam violated international law.



Do Thi Minh Hanh (left) and Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung are reunited.

Photo: Tran Bang, Facebook



Tom Byabagamba (left), Frank Rusagara (center), and François Kabayiza (right).

Photo: New Times

The prolonged incarceration of Frank Rusagara, Tom Byabagamba, and François Kabayiza is illustrative of Rwanda's intolerance of criticism, no matter how benign it might be. Frank and Tom were high-ranking military officers with close ties to President Paul Kagame. The two men were arrested in August 2014 after making private comments that were critical of the government to colleagues. François was targeted because he worked as a driver for Frank. After a trial before a military tribunal, they received sentences of 20, 21, and five years, respectively.

François was released in August 2019 after serving his sentence. We continue to advocate for the release of Frank and Tom, mobilizing members of the UK Parliament to appeal for their freedom.

PROFILE OF A COUNTRY IN FOCUS: SAUDI ARABIA

The heinous murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last year, although shocking, was characteristic of Saudi Arabia's complete disregard for the rule of law. More troubling was the lack of accountability for the perpetrators, shielded by a royal family that cherishes loyalty and punishes dissent.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, has cast himself as reformer. In the years since he has come to power, several headline-grabbing social reforms have materialized—a 35-year prohibition on cinemas was ended, restaurants are now permitted to play music, and the ban on women drivers was lifted. Despite these changes, the government maintains strict limitations on nearly every aspect of political and civil life.

Of the myriad human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, arbitrary detention and torture are the most pernicious. Torture is widespread in the prison system, used to coerce confessions and maintain control over the thousands of political prisoners. An unprecedented leak earlier this year of medical reports for at least nine prisoners contained appalling revelations, including extended periods of solitary detention, visible burns, severe weight loss, bloody vomit, and at least two detainees who were unable to walk because of these injuries. These medical reports were presented to King Salman with recommendations from his advisors for pardons; to date, no pardons have been granted.

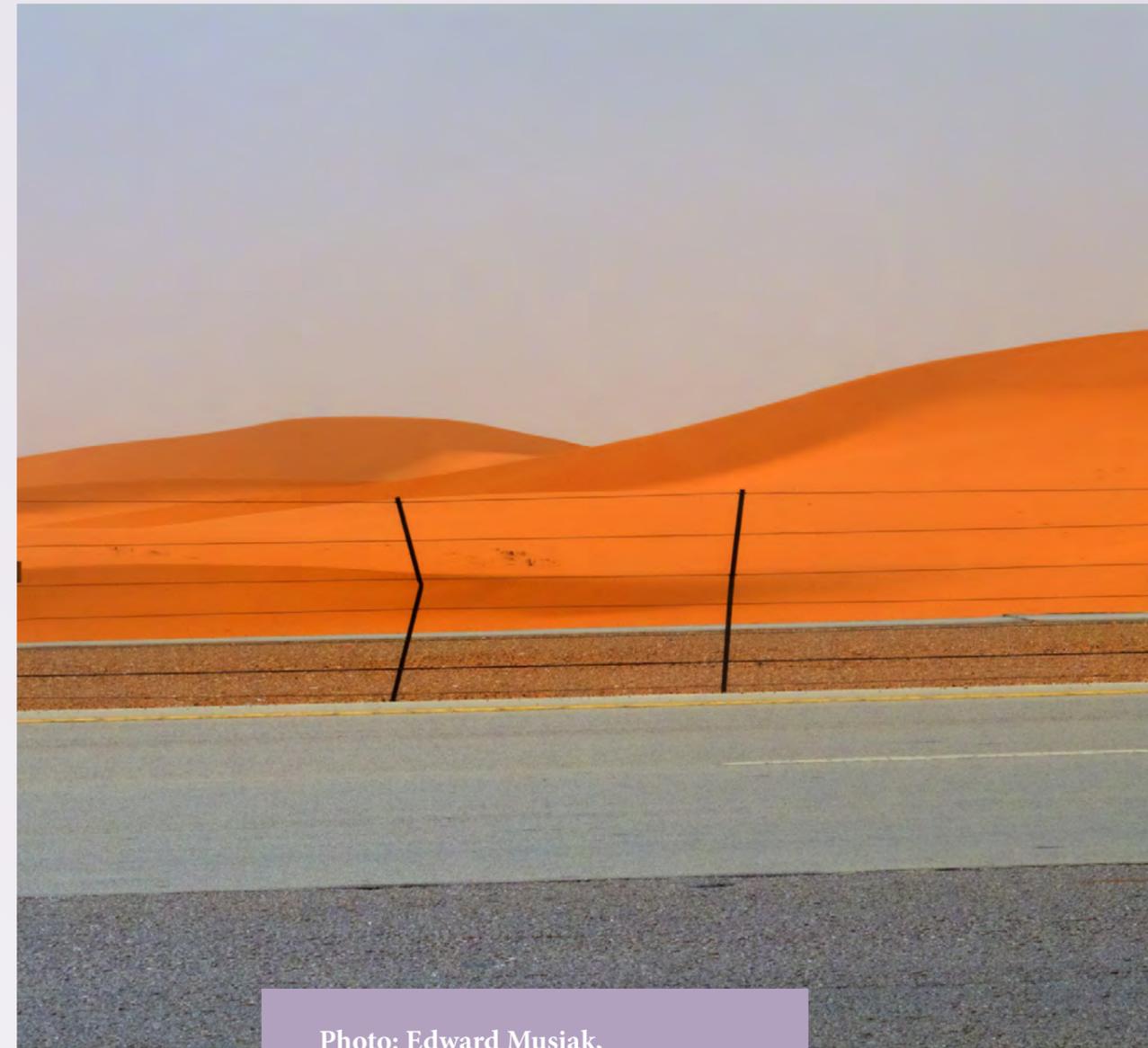


Photo: Edward Musiak,
Flickr

PERSECUTED
FOR FREEDOM





Loujain Alhathloul

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

PROGRESSING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN SAUDI ARABIA

Loujain Alhathloul is one of Saudi Arabia most fearless women's rights activists. In December 2014, in protest of the driving ban on women, she attempted to drive across the border from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia. The simple act of disobedience resulted in 70 days in jail and a travel ban.

Last year, Loujain was studying in the United Arab Emirates in March 2018 when she was arrested and forcibly put on a private plane to Riyadh. She was held for a few days and subjected to a new travel ban, effectively ending her academic pursuits. Several months later, in May, she was arrested again along with five other women's rights activists. Pro-government media called Loujain and her fellow activists traitors for campaigning against the very ban on women drivers that was about to be abolished.

Loujain has endured unimaginable hardships during her incarceration. When her parents visited her in December 2018, she collapsed in tears detailing the reprehensible treatment she is subjected to, the black bruises on her thighs evidence of her abuse. She has been held in solitary confinement, beaten, waterboarded, given electric shocks, sexually harassed, and threatened with rape and murder. Saud al-Qahtani, the former advisor to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and one of the key officials present during Jamal Khashoggi's murder, personally oversaw the interrogation sessions.

Inexplicably, this past August, state security officials offered Loujain a deal. She would be released from prison if she signed a statement and made a video claiming that she had never been tortured. She refused. As a result, she remains imprisoned for the foreseeable future.

In September 2019, Freedom Now submitted a petition to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on behalf of Loujain.

PROTECTING FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN VIETNAM

Between April and May 2016 millions of fish carcasses washed up on the shores of Vietnam. It was the worst environmental disaster in the country's history, decimating the local fishing industry and crippling tourism. The party responsible was the Formosa steel plant. The plant illegally discharged 300 tons of cyanide and other toxic industrial waste into the ocean through drainage pipes. Emboldened by the government's tepid response to the ecological catastrophe, Formosa denied responsibility for months. It was not until June 2016 the corporation acknowledged it was at fault.

In the meantime, thousands of Vietnamese citizens protested the tragedy and lack of accountability. They staged demonstrations and took to social media to express their anger with Formosa and the government that should have protected them. Journalist Nguyen Van Hoa was there to capture the bubbling discontent of the thousands impacted by the devastation. As a videographer for Radio Free Asia's Vietnamese language service, he was the first person to broadcast live footage of protests outside the Formosa plant. In October 2016, his footage of more than 10,000 peaceful protesters went viral.

The Vietnamese government did not appreciate Hoa's on the ground reporting. In January 2017, he was arrested and charged under the notorious Article 88 of the 1999 Criminal Code – "disseminating propaganda against the state" – a charge which carried a heavy sentence. Hoa spent nearly a year in detention before his trial began in November 2017. The trial was a short affair, after which Hoa was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison.

Freedom Now has sought to bring international attention to Hoa's case, including by nominating him for the 2019 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

Disturbingly, Hoa's story is not unique. The Vietnamese government has tripled the number of its political prisoners in recent years; it now detains more than 250 individuals for exercising their human rights. Moreover, the government has passed a series of laws to legitimize its repression of civil society. In addition to Hoa, Freedom Now is advocating for the release of six other prisoners of conscience in Vietnam.



Nguyen Van Hoa is flanked by military officials during his trial

Photo: Radio Free Asia

PRISON TRAGEDY IN TAJIKISTAN



The exterior of Kirpichniy Prison.

Photo: Current Time TV

When a client's life is in danger, we take urgent action. But there are some dangers we can neither foresee nor deter.

Sattor Karimov was one of the dozen of opposition politicians we represented in the isolated Central Asian nation of Tajikistan. He was a member of what was once the most popular opposition party in the country – the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Sattor and his colleagues were imprisoned after the government launched a wide scale campaign to dismantle and discredit any viable opposition parties in the country.

On May 19, during the holy month of Ramadan, Sattor went to the prayer room of the maximum security Kirpichniy Prison. Meanwhile, prisoners affiliated with ISIS overpowered and killed three guards. Chaos consumed the facility. ISIS members sought out prisoners that challenged their ideology, including Sattor and Zayd Saidov, an opposition politician unaffiliated with the IRPT and another Freedom Now client. Sattor and two other IRPT members were brutally killed by ISIS. Thankfully, Zayd was unharmed due to the selfless actions of fellow inmates. After the government intervened, at least 29 prisoners were dead.

The day after the riot we condemned the violence and called on the government to allow an independent investigation. We echoed this call before the UN Human Rights Committee when we briefed the body on Tajikistan in July 2019.

In the meantime, we continue to advocate for the release of Sattor's fellow IRPT members. We filed a petition to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on their behalf two days after the riot. And we continue to advocate for the release of our other Tajik clients: businessman Zayd Saidov, IRPT leader Mahmadli Hayit, and lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov.

Freedom Now

is a nonpartisan US and UK-based nonprofit organization that works to free prisoners of conscience through legal, political, and public relations advocacy. We serve individuals who have been wrongly imprisoned all over the world, seeking their freedom from detention and justice for the violation of their most sacred rights.

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Our Supporters

Freedom Now extends our profound gratitude to the individuals, law firms, and foundations whose generosity makes it possible for us to perform our critical work. We consider all of our donors essential partners in our mission. This list includes donors who made substantial gifts between October 1, 2018 and November 1, 2019.

Open Society Foundations

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OUR NGO PARTNERS

We are proud to have collaborated with many human rights organizations throughout 2019 that share our commitment to ending arbitrary detention and restoring the rule of law. We are especially proud of collaborations with the following organizations:



CRUDE ACCOUNTABILITY



OUR LAW FIRM PARTNERS

Freedom Now is grateful for the support we receive from our law firm partners, law schools, and individual attorneys. It is because of this generous pro bono assistance we are able to provide individualized case assistance to so many prisoners of conscience.:

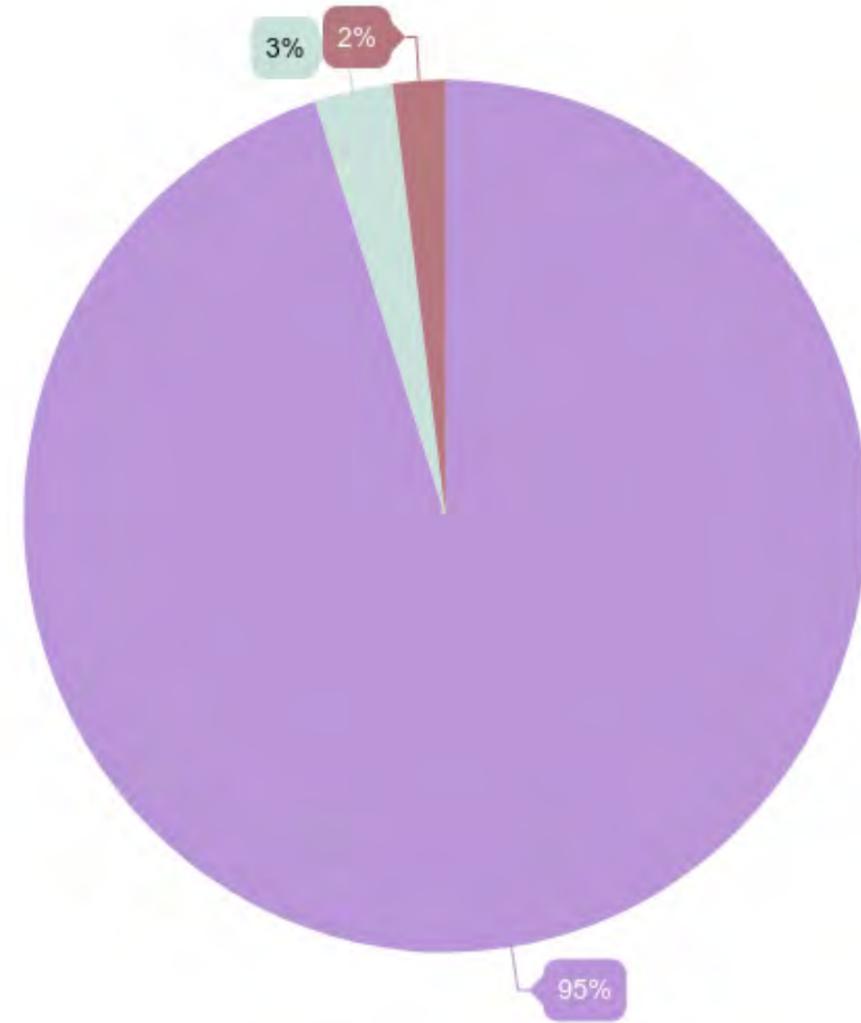


Revenue	November 2018-October 2019
Foundation Grants	\$45,950
Individual Contributions	\$339,622
Pro Bono Support (2018)*	\$2,481,660
Total Public Support and Revenue	\$2,867,232

Expenses	November 2018-October 2019
Salaries and Benefits	\$163,941
Legal Services*	\$2,481,660
Office rent	\$20,826
Travel and Meetings	\$7,137
Consulting Fees	\$8,542
Telecommunications	\$2,280
Admin Fees	\$1,901
Printing, Postage, and Supplies	\$188
Other Indirect Costs	\$2,037
Total	\$2,690,549

*This includes the 3,244 hours of pro bono time provided by law firm volunteers only and obtained during the 2018 calendar year. Pro bono rates are calculated at \$765/hour, which is an average of rates charged by the law firms which provide us with services.

Expenses by category



- Program (95%)
- Administrative (3%)
- Fundraising (2%)