

Zere Asylbek feminist song draws supporters and death threats in Kyrgyzstan

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Pleas for civility and respect from Zere Asylbek, a songwriter in Bishkek, have been drowned by rage over her clothing.



A feminist manifesto sung by a 19-year-old Kyrgyz student has rekindled debates over women's rights in Kyrgyzstan. The spectrum of public reaction has ranged from a supportive social media campaign to death threats, the artist says.

The Kyrgyz-language song, entitled Kyz ("Girl") [\[1\]](#), was released some two months ago, but the video appeared only on September 13. Though Zere Asylbek – who performs under the name Zere – soon removed the video from her YouTube channel, another channel specializing in Kyrgyz music reposted it. It soon went viral.

In the pop tune, Zere pleads for a future with relaxed social norms, a time when people respect each other for being unique:

*I wish the time passed, I wish (a new) time came
When they wouldn't preach to me how I should spend my life
When they wouldn't tell me 'Do like this,' 'Don't do like that'
Why should I be like you want, or like the majority wants,
I am a person, and I have my freedom of speech.
Where is your respect for me?
I'll respect you. You respect me.
You and I, together,
Hey, dear, join me,
We will create our freedom.*

Filmed against the breathtaking Tian-Shan mountains, Zere stands surrounded by several young women in long black-and-white robes. They jump into water and emerge as modern individuals: one donning a traditional dress and headscarf, one in a bikini, one in hijab, and another as a tomboy in jeans with short blue hair.

"All of us are different. It is wrong to judge a book by its cover and put people in two camps: good or bad, black or white," Zere – a student in Bishkek who runs a YouTube channel [\[2\]](#) with English lessons for kids – explained in a September 18 interview with the Sheisnomad website [\[3\]](#). "People

particularly like to judge girls by their dress and style.”

Water, she said, symbolizes opinions and judgements.

“Almost all girls in our country are shamed on a daily basis. We constantly hear remarks and unsolicited advice. It is important not to drown in someone’s opinions and generally accepted standards, not to lose yourself.”

Zere’s message resonates in conservative, Muslim-majority Kyrgyzstan, where women routinely suffer discrimination, domestic violence, and the threat of being kidnapped and forced into marriage. In recent years, lawmakers have considered bills to stop women traveling abroad alone and to prohibit staffers from wearing skirts, while refusing to ban child marriage.

“I wrote a song about what concerns me the most at the moment, and it is the freedom of women and people in general. I’ve always protested and felt responsibility for everything that happens around me,” Zere said in the interview, adding that she was also deeply touched by the murder of Burulai Turdaaly kyzy [4], a 20-year-old Kyrgyz woman who was stabbed to death in May while being held in a police station holding cell with the man who had kidnapped her [5].

But it isn’t Zere’s message that is stirring public outrage or even much reflection. Instead, how she looks is fueling most online tantrums and threats. She appears in the video wearing bright red lipstick, a short skirt, and a black blazer with nothing under it but a purple lacy bra.

“If you don’t remove the video and don’t apologize to the Kyrgyz people, we will kill you soon. This will be the first and the last time,” read a private message sent by user @bespredel__kg on Instagram. “I will gladly join and cut your head off,” added another Instagram user, @ddjumabaev.

In support, some women are appearing in their Facebook profile photos wearing bras [6].

Zere’s father, Asylbek Zhoodonbekov, has also voiced his support. Although he admitted that he wasn’t happy with his daughter posing in her underwear, he defended her right to self-expression and respect.

“Some people ask me, ‘Is this crone your daughter? How can an educator like you have a daughter like her?’ her father, a teacher, wrote in a Facebook post. “Yes, Zere is my daughter: a freethinking daughter of free Kyrgyzstan [7].”

Bermet Talant, Sep 18, 2018

P.S.

- <https://eurasianet.org/feminist-song-draws-supporters-and-death-threats-in-kyrgyzstan>
- Bermet Talant is a Kyrgyz journalist in Ukraine.

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRBA-4IrWFM>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVMRDTz7bRx6IJlyKSX7oZg/featured>

[3] <http://sheisnomad.com/mag/zere>

[4] <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-bride-kidnapping-ends-in-brutal-stabbing-prompting-outrage/29257873.html>

[5] <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-bride-kidnapping-case-triggers-rare-un-response>

[6] <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=260763898107553&set=a.120524442131500&type=3&theater>

[7] <https://www.facebook.com/asylbek.zhoodonbekov/posts/2645027415523088>