

Uzbekistan: protests against gentrification in Tashkent

Evicted without warning: sudden demolitions spark anger

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Controversial regeneration projects in Uzbekistan have cost thousands their homes - but have also sparked an unprecedented burst of grassroots activism

It was the middle of the afternoon when a demolition crew got to work on the three-floor residential building in the centre of Tashkent, the capital of [Uzbekistan](#). Usually there would be nothing untoward about this - but eight of the flats were still occupied.

"We could hear how they were demolishing the flats beneath us. It was like an earthquake," said Nikolai Polkin, who lived on the upper floor with his wife and their three children, the youngest of whom is two years old. "They carried out work every day. There was constant noise. But we got really worried when they began removing the structural beams and cracks appeared in our walls."

The demolition was part of a controversial urban regeneration project that has seen at least 10,000 people evicted from their homes in Tashkent. The homes of another 30,000 people are also under threat as a result of the city's urban renovation scheme.

It has triggered an unprecedented burst of grassroots activism in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet state in central Asia that was ruled by Islam Karimov, one of the world's most notorious dictators, until his death in 2016.

In Tashkent, which has 2.4 million inhabitants, the vast majority of the demolitions take place in the centre, where property prices are highest, leading to accusations that corrupt officials are turning people out of their homes to get rich on shady property deals. Officials often justify the demolitions by saying the land is required for "government needs" - a catch-all phrase.

Karimov was succeeded as Uzbekistan's president in 2016 by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, previously prime minister, who took 89% of the vote in an election widely denounced as undemocratic. Since coming to power, Mirziyoyev has been praised internationally for a series of tentative reforms including a reduction in the powers of the once-feared state security service and the release of dozens of political prisoners.

But the ongoing bulldozing of private properties and historical buildings is threatening Mirziyoyev's efforts to attract foreign investors and tourists to boost the country's struggling economy, and to create favourable conditions for Uzbek businesses.

Authorities offer compensation or provide replacement housing for those evicted from their properties, but critics say the sums of money offered are often miserly and the new homes frequently of inferior quality, and that people are forced to stay in far-away temporary accommodation for months while their new flats are being built. Concerns such as these were why the Polkins and their

neighbours initially stayed put, even as their home was being knocked down around them.

“No one explained to us officially what the rush was and why they couldn’t have built us new flats first before trying to evict us,” said Polkin. The family are now in temporary accommodation waiting to be rehoused.

Other demolitions in Tashkent appear to have been motivated by political concerns. In October, on the eve of Mirziyoyev’s first state visit to India, a demolition crew arrived unexpectedly in a residential area at 9pm and ordered people to pack their bags. It was later reported that Mirziyoyev had previously promised India that he would provide it with land for a bigger embassy in Tashkent, and officials decided to make good on the pledge ahead of his trip to New Delhi. Five months on, construction has still not begun. The remains of dozens of homes – bricks, shattered glass and broken wood – lie on what is now a wasteland, while residents have been scattered across Tashkent.

Although street protests are barred in Uzbekistan, a growing opposition to the demolitions is being organised by concerned residents, cultural heritage activists and independent journalists.

“Everyone in Tashkent is worried that their homes could be next,” said Farida Charif, who runs a popular Facebook forum that coordinates legal advice for people whose homes are at risk of a visit from a demolition crew. “Anyone’s house can be demolished without any warning at all. You can be sitting at home and they can come along and start tearing your roof off.” Although Facebook is blocked by the Uzbek government, many people use VPNs (virtual private networks) to get around the ban.

Discontent has occasionally spilled out into the streets. Charif was just one of scores of angry locals who crowded into district administration offices in Tashkent in February over concerns that their homes were next in line for the wrecking ball as part of a property development scheme. “They are treating us worse than animals!” said Vladimir, an elderly man. Local journalists said such a mass display of public dissent would have been unthinkable under Karimov, whose critics were subject to horrific torture in Uzbekistan’s brutal prisons.

The demolitions have also devastated the Uzbek capital’s historic *mahallas*, where homes have been torn down to make way for a \$1.3bn business centre called [Tashkent City](#) that has been mired in allegations of corruption and conflicts of interest.

In January, after an [investigation](#) by the independent global media platform Open Democracy, Jaxongir Artikxodjaev, the mayor of Tashkent, [admitted](#) he has business interests in one of the companies involved in the project. Open Democracy also suggested Artikxodjaev may also have links to other companies with construction, commercial and investment interests in the mega-development.

The [House of the Train Driver](#) in Tashkent, recognised by a host of international experts as a valuable example of early Soviet architecture in central Asia, was another building that faced the bulldozers after officials ruled it could be demolished as part of the city’s urban renovation scheme. Residents found a novel way to raise awareness of its plight.

“Instead of protest rallies, we held fashion shows, festivals, and outdoor markets,” said one resident, speaking on condition of anonymity over fear of possible reprisals. The tactics appear to have been successful: Uzbekistan’s culture ministry has placed the house on its list of protected architectural monuments.

In ancient Uzbek cities like Samarkand, urban regeneration projects are stirring social tensions and threatening Unesco-listed historic neighbourhoods that are vital for tourism. In November, dozens of

residents of one neighbourhood in Samarkand blocked off a street in a successful bid to prevent the bulldozers moving in. Some were briefly detained when they attempted to take their grievances to a high-profile human rights forum held in the city as part of the government's bid to improve the country's international image.

Businesses, including those with foreign investors from western Europe, have also suffered. The owners of the Arvand Tashkent Stroy company, which owns a fashionable restaurant complex in central Tashkent, have accused city officials of seeking to seize its lucrative property, ostensibly for "government needs".

As the demolitions pick up pace, hundreds of low-income families living in flats built by a company belonging to Mukhmmadbobur Khodjaev, a Tashkent-based businessman and philanthropist, are also in danger of losing their homes after officials ruled that they violated construction norms. Khodjaev, who invested millions of dollars in the three-storey homes in Tashkent, denies the allegations. "Officials told me that I have no right to provide flats at such low prices or even for free," he said. "They want to get rid of me as a competitor."

"All the government's statements about wanting to attract investors are a lie," said Alexei Volosevich, an independent journalist who has reported extensively on the demolitions. "What foreign investors will come to a country where there is no respect whatsoever for property rights?"

But after years of life under Karimov's brutal regime, most Uzbeks remain fearful of confronting the authorities. "People still haven't got used to demanding things from officials, and officials still haven't got used to people making demands," said Shukhrat Ganiev, a human rights worker. "It will take a long time for people to stop being afraid."

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