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Kazakh opposition leader on trial for attempting to overthrow government

Vladimir Kozlov faces 13 years in prison if convicted of charges that include orchestrating dissent among striking oil workers. Observers fear the trial could undermine some of the country's progress in developing a multiparty democracy.

By Mariya Gordeyeva, Reuters / August 17, 2012



In this undated photo provided by Alga Party, Vladimir Kozlov, 52, leader of



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the unregistered Kazakhstan's political party Alga, speaks at an undisclosed location. The trial of the most vocal opposition leader in Kazakhstan on charges of seeking to overthrow the government began Thursday.

Alga Party/AP

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AKTAU, KAZAKHSTAN

An outspoken critic of [Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev](#) was accused on Thursday of colluding with a billionaire fugitive to overthrow the government in a trial the [United States](#) says will test democratic reforms in the oil-rich former Soviet state.

Prosecutors accused Vladimir Kozlov, leader of the unofficial political party Alga!, of helping orchestrate dissent among striking oil workers in the prelude to deadly rioting on Dec. 16-17 that shattered [Kazakhstan's](#) reputation for stability.

Shouts for release

He denied the charges and, as the trial began in a

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He denied the charges and, as the trial began in a packed courtroom, around 30 of his supporters shouted for his release.

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At least 15 people were killed in western **Kazakhstan** when police opened fire on protesters in riots that followed months of protests by sacked oilmen, posing the most serious challenge to Nazarbayev in his more than two decades as president.

Kazakhstan's leaders are particularly wary of dissent following mass protests in **Russia**, which shares a language favored by millions of its citizens and remains the country's biggest trading partner.

In recent years, they have tried to balance their desire to preserve stability and robust economic growth with efforts to improve the country's image on the world stage.

Kozlov, 52, faces a maximum prison term of 13 years if convicted of charges that include inciting social discord and trying forcibly to overthrow the constitutional order. Two independent opposition activists are on trial alongside him.

One of the accused, 54-year-old local oil worker Akzhanat Aminov, pleaded guilty. The other activist, Serik Sapargaly, 60, said he accepted some blame without admitting full guilt.

'A weak spot'

Dressed in an open-necked shirt, Kozlov, who denied all charges, waved at supporters when led into a glass box in the court in the Caspian port city of Aktau, 1,625 miles west of the capital, Astana.



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Prosecutors said he had acted under orders from Mukhtar Ablyazov, the self-exiled former head of Kazakh bank BTA and an arch foe of Nazarbayev, to travel the country and find "a weak spot".

Kozlov had earlier asked the judge to postpone the hearing to allow him more time to familiarize himself with the 1,300-page case document. Permission was denied, prompting slow claps from his supporters that drew a warning from the judge.

"He will fight the charges," Kozlov's wife, Aliya Turuzbekova, told Reuters after the court adjourned for the day. "But he understands that a conviction and severe punishment await. He is preparing his family for this."

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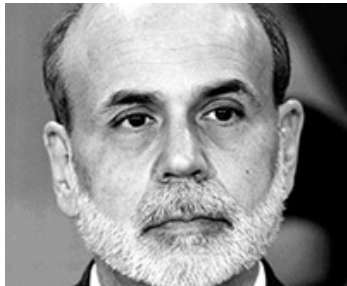
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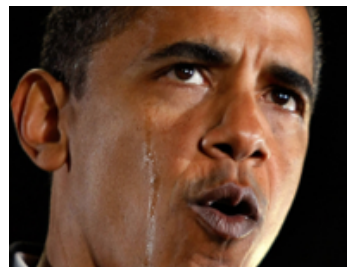
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The advertisement features a close-up of a white coffee cup filled with dark coffee and foam on the left. The Aramark logo is in the top right, and the text 'OFFICE COFFEE SERVICES MADE EASY' is in the center right. A 'LEARN MORE' button with a right-pointing arrow is at the bottom right.



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