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## **Kyrgyzstan: Detention and interrogation of women human rights defenders Tolekan Ismailova and Bermet Borubaieva**

On 13 March 2026, women human rights defenders **Tolekan Ismailova** and **Bermet Borubaieva** were arbitrarily detained and questioned by authorities in Kyrgyzstan. The women human rights defenders were released on the same day, after being held for nearly six hours at the Main Department of Internal Affairs of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. On this day, Tolekan Ismailova and Bermet Borubaieva were planning to hold a peaceful protest against the continued ban on freedom of assembly imposed by the authorities in Kyrgyzstan in 2022. This ban has been enforced due to the ongoing [trial against human rights defenders, civic activists, and members of the political opposition](#).

[Tolekan Ismailova](#) is a woman human rights defender and the Director of Human Rights Movement: Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan (Bir Duino). The organisation is involved in providing legal advice, advocacy on women's, labour, and lands rights, monitoring of elections and budget transparency of government organs, promotion of the freedom of association, and the work of human rights defenders through culture and arts. The movement has been particularly engaged in the organisation of the International Documentary Film Festival on Human Rights. Tolekan Ismailova's human rights work and leadership has been recognised by several national and international awards. The latest recognition was Ukraine's Order of Princess Olha for women human rights defenders' contributions to peacebuilding efforts.

[Bermet Borubaieva](#) is a woman human rights defender working on defending environmental rights in Kyrgyzstan. She is a founder of the initiative #BishkekSmog, focusing on environmental issues in urban settings of Bishkek, particularly air pollution. Recently, she has been monitoring the efforts by Bishkek authorities to dismantle the environmentally friendly trolleybus system; and calling attention to the resulting increase in air pollution.

On 13 March 2026 at approximately 10:00, law enforcement authorities detained women human rights defenders Tolekan Ismailova and Bermet Borubaieva near the co-working space Ololo Erkindik, where Bir Duino has an office space. The women human rights defenders were planning to participate in a peaceful protest later that day against the continued ban on freedom of assembly in Pervomaiskii District of Bishkek. The authorities imposed this ban in the Pervomaiskii District in November 2022 during the trial against human rights defenders, civic activists, and members of the political opposition who

demanded access to information about the decision to transfer the ownership of the Kempir-Abad water reserve to Uzbekistan. Both Tolekan Ismailova and Bermet Borubaieva have publicly opposed the ban. For example, Bir Duino filed a complaint with the Constitutional Court of Kyrgyzstan in 2024, claiming that the ban violates the constitutional right to freedom of assembly.

On 12 March 2026, Tolekan Ismailova was alerted to a pre-trial investigation carried out by the Investigative Department of the Main Department of Internal Affairs of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. From documents published on social media, it appears that authorities monitored a Facebook account registered under the name 'Tolekan Ismailova.' Allegedly, this account circulated "publications and data that provokes public resonance and negative reaction from [social media platform] users." Within the framework of the investigation, the authorities requested to identify and summon the user of account.

Bermet Borubaieva and Tolekan Ismailova were detained the following day near the Bir Duino offices. The authorities presented summons papers to Tolekan Ismailova but not to Bermet Borubaieva, who met Tolekan Ismailova shortly before the authorities arrived and was nevertheless instructed to comply with the summons. Bermet Borubaieva agreed, fearing for her and Tolekan Ismailova's safety. At the Main Department of Internal Affairs of Bishkek, the authorities started questioning Tolekan Ismailova before her lawyer arrived. There was no water or food available during almost six hours of detention and questioning.

As reported in the protocol of the questioning of Tolekan Ismailova, the authorities expressed specific concerns over the woman human rights defender's Facebook posts addressing Russia's war in Ukraine. Her posts show support for Ukrainian human rights defenders and condemn the war crimes committed by the Russian military. Bishkek investigative authorities continuously and intensely interrogated Tolekan Ismailova on these posts, questioning if they were sponsored by third parties and if she was aware that these posts have the potential to spark conflict. The authorities also questioned her on the activities and sources of funding of her human rights organisation Bir Duino.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arbitrary detention and harassment against women human rights defenders Tolekan Ismailova and Bermet Borubaieva, in what appears to be a reprisal for their non-violent and legitimate human rights work. Attempts to penalise human rights defenders for the exercise of their freedom of expression on social media amounts to de facto censorship and has created a chilling effect on civic space in Kyrgyzstan. Such actions restrict access to independent human rights information and severely undermine freedom of expression in the country. Front Line Defenders asserts that the timing of the detention of the women human rights defenders was intended to disrupt their plan to participate in the peaceful protest.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Kyrgyzstan to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally cease the harassment against women human rights defenders Tolekan Ismailova and Bermet Borubaieva, and ensure their physical and psychological integrity;

2. Launch an investigation into the unlawful and arbitrary detention of Bermet Borubaieva and Toilekan Ismailova in line with the international law, and to publish the results of this investigation;
3. End the attempts to criminalise the digital work of human rights defenders on social media;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan can carry out their activities without fear of reprisals and free from restrictions, in accordance with Kyrgyzstan's international human rights obligations.

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