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## Talking revolution in Kazakhstan



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Watching the defendants enter the Aktau court today, I wondered if one of them would recognise me. I had last seen Roza Tuletayeva in October 2011 when I had come to her home town of Zhanaozen to report on a long-standing industrial dispute between sacked oil workers and the state oil company that employed them.

Roza stood out from her colleagues - many of them weatherbeaten males toughened by their working lives. By contrast, Roza was a woman. Calm and dignified, she had been open and helpful towards foreign journalists and observers that had come to Mangistau region to try to understand why the dispute over pay had remained unsettled for so many months.

After the protest ended in the tragic events of December 16, in which, somehow, the ordered occupation by the oil workers of Zhanaozen's main square had turned into a battle ground and more than a dozen people lost their lives to police bullets, Roza turned herself in to the authorities.

That was when she was last a free woman. Out of all the convictions on Monday, Roza received the longest term - seven years in prison, for organising mass disturbances. The prosecution based much of their argument on tapped phone calls and text messages made from Roza to journalists and activists in the run-up to the violence.

I wonder whether her willingness to talk to me and other members of the international media made her a target. In February an obscure news portal published an [opinion piece](#) about my visit to Zhanaozen.

"It is no accident that in October last year, journalists from the TV channel [Al Jazeera] arrived in Mangistau to allegedly collect information about the oil strike. Immediately there was a smell of revolution in the air".

[Another article](#) that same week lists in meticulous detail the names of all foreign journalists and observers that had been to Zhanaozen and the dates of their visits. That sort of information likely came from the country's national security agency, the KNB.

"It is good that foreigners are interested in Kazakhstan and visit previously closed and little-known regions. It's just too bad that they flock there for the smell of blood, just like flies".

That same dark logic of suspicion can be found in the [prosecution's indictment](#). Roza had provided information to "miscreant" foreign journalists. According to transcripts, she had spoken to one activist and called for "the whole of Kazakhstan" to rise up.

Like many of her co-defendants, Roza testified in court that the police had tortured her while in custody. "They put a garbage bag over my head, suffocated me. When they take the bag off, I had swollen eyes and couldn't breathe, everything was spinning... They said: "You'll do everything that we say. You'll take responsibility for it all."

On Monday, she looked brave and almost cheerful as the judge read out the verdicts. She never caught my eye and I didn't see her being taken away. By that stage the courtroom had descended into chaos as relatives of the convicted raged with despair and indignation.

President Nazarbayev has little to fear from an Arab spring, but revolutionary talk is enough to get one jailed.

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