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UPR Submission

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Written submission by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) on the state of freedom of information and media circulation in UZBEKISTAN

Overview of the press freedom situation

Year after year, Uzbekistan presents one of the worst records for freedom of information in the world. The country ranked 157th out of 179 countries in the 2011/2012 Worldwide Press freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. It is one of 12 States the organization lists as "Internet enemies" for their systematic use of cybercensorship. And Uzbek President Islam Karimov still appears in the updated list of "Predators of freedom of information", which Reporters Without Borders released earlier this year.

The situation is even direr than what was presented during the 3rd session of the Universal Periodic Review, in December 2008. As far as press freedom is concerned, none of the recommendations Uzbekistan then promised to consider has been implemented. Far from broadening the area of freedom of information, the government has stepped up its control and repression tools to adapt to the increasing role of the new media. At least 10 journalists are behind bars for performing their professional activity or expressing dissident opinions.

1. Massive censorship

President Karimov is everywhere in the media, which credit him with all the country's successes, and tolerates no reporting of the country's social and economic life. Economic under-development and the plight of women, for example, are incompatible with the modern image the regime wants to project. All independent and opposition information websites are blocked in the country.

The few remaining independent local journalists operate in a climate of fear. They have virtually no choice but working for information websites that are based abroad and blocked in the country, such as Fergananeews or Uznews. The authorities keep a close watch on journalists entering and leaving the country and recently resumed denying entry to journalists with proper visas: Novaya Gazeta correspondent Victoria Ivleva, BBC reporter Natalia Antelava, for instance, were banned from entering the country in 2012.

Media legislation reform is underway and officials maintain a pro-media freedom discourse.

But the official rhetoric is very remote from the contemptible reality.

Since 2011, the Uzbek regime has been attempting to monitor media activities even more strictly in order to offset the fallout from Arab Spring. State media journalists have been banned from talking to foreign diplomats without government permission, Human Rights Watch has been expelled from the country, ISPs and mobile phone operators have been required to report mass mailings of “suspicious content” and to disconnect their networks at the authorities’ simple request.

More websites have been blocked, such as that of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and that of Russian investigative magazine *Rusky Reporter*. In August 2011, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of Uzbekistan’s independence, more than 50 major websites, including such foreign news portals as those of *The New York Times*, *Reuters*, *Bloomberg* and *Lenta.ru*, as well as the Google research engine, *Reporters Without Borders’* website, etc., were blocked for several days.

Uzbek discussion forums on events in Egypt, Tunisia, and Bahrain such as *arbuz.com* have been blocked and contributors arrested. Articles and news about demonstrations and protest movements have been blocked, particularly the controversy surrounding the United Nations’ resolutions on Syria. The *BBC* website was unblocked in late 2011, but since January 2012, specific pages dealing with the Arab Spring have been inaccessible.

Uzbekistan has increasingly been exporting its repressive practices. The country has globally positioned itself as the champion of tighter Web controls. Not content to warn his Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies against online “terrorism” and “revolutionary contagion,” the Tashkent government also signed, notably with China and Russia, an International Code of Conduct for Information Security aimed at guaranteeing “cybersecurity,” which it would like to see adopted by the United Nations.

2. Judicial harassment of independent journalists

At least 10 journalists are currently held in Uzbekistan’s prisons, in which, according to many reports, torture is virtually systematic:

- Held since 21 January 2010 - Khayrullo Khamidov - *Nawruz*
- Held since 22 February 2009 - Dilmurod Sayid - *Ezgulik*
- Held since 16 February 2009 - Bakhrom Ibragimov - *Irmok*
- Held since 16 February 2009 - Davron Kabilov - *Irmok*
- Held since 16 February 2009 - Ravshanbek Vafoev - *Irmok*
- Held since 16 February 2009 - Abdulaziz Dadakhonov - *Irmok*
- Held since 16 February 2009 - Botyrbek Eshkuziev - *Irmok*
- Held since 7 June 2008 - Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov – freelancer
- Held since 15 March 1999 - Jusuf Ruzimuradov - *Erk*
- Held since 15 March 1999 - Mohammed Bekzhanov - *Erk*

Journalists can be branded as the country’s “enemies” for covering a political, economic or social issue such as poverty, public health or the situation of women. They may find absurd accusations brought against them, such as “insulting the Uzbek people” or “religious extremism”, the respective charges on which well-known photographer Umida Akhmedova and popular radio host Khayrullo Khamidov were tried in 2010.

An investigative journalist and the president’s nephew, Jamshid Karimov was forcibly held in a psychiatric hospital from 2007 to 2011. His health had reportedly been adversely affected by the medication he had received. He disappeared again in January 2012 and his whereabouts remain unknown.

Mohammed Bekzhanov, the onetime editor of the opposition newspaper *Erk*, was due to have been released in February after nearly 13 years in detention but he was sentenced to another four years and eight months in prison on 24 January on a charge of refusing to comply with

the demands of prison officials. Arrested in March 1999, tortured and jailed in Kasan, in the south of the country, Bekzhanov is now one of the world's longest-held journalists.

The government's harassment is becoming very inventive and includes a growing tendency to prosecute journalists for things they did not write: this happened in 2012 to independent journalists Elena Bondar and Viktor Krymzalov, who were sentenced to heavy fines.

3. Increased surveillance of Internet users

In August 2011, the already well-developed Internet surveillance apparatus was reinforced with the creation of a "Committee of Experts on Information and Mass Communication." Exclusively made up of government employees, this new structure was created to analyze and interpret data collected by the Center for Monitoring Mass Communications in the aim of monitoring the media and formulating new laws.

Phishing attempts have been detected. A mirror website of the Uzbek Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty service, ozod.orca.uz, has been set up to collect the personal data of Internet users consulting the website.

On 1 September 2011, the regime launched a national social networking site – Muloqot ("Dialogue"), with drastic Terms of Use – which some observers interpreted as a prelude to blocking Facebook, or at least as indicating their desire to restrict its influence. Colleagues in RFE/RL's Uzbek Service managed to register on the first day and post RFE/RL content (blocked in Uzbekistan) to a general Wall (at that point there were only about 400 users). Within 15 minutes, however, their profiles were deleted. Another RFE/RL staffer posted some comments praising the president's daughter, Gulnara Karimova, and their profile has remained active.

Two human rights activists, Saida Kurbanova and Gulbahor Turaeva, were harassed and intimidated after the former denounced online issues concerning government credit cards, and the latter criticized the unhappy fate of the country's elderly and the defects of the waste collection system.

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders urgently calls upon the Uzbek authorities and judiciary to:

- Release all 10 journalists currently held in detention in connection with their professional activities. In the meanwhile, provide information on their detention condition.
- Provide information on Jamshid Karimov's whereabouts.
- Lift the restrictions on national and foreign media activities, allow independent and critical coverage of the government's actions, and ensure full compliance of the Uzbek law and practices with Article 19 of the ICCPR.
- Allow the circulation of independent and opposition media, unblock information websites.
- Stop using ISPs and mobile phone operators as control and repression tools against Internet users.