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UZBEKISTAN

**Contribution by Reporters Without Borders (RSF),
a non-governmental organization with special consultative status,
on freedom of the media and information in Uzbekistan**

An international Paris-based NGO that has promoted media freedom worldwide since 1985, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has consultative status with the United Nations. Its bureaux in ten cities around the world and its network of correspondents in 130 countries enable it to closely monitor freedom of information and expression all over the world.

Overview of the press freedom situation: persistent repression despite new hopes

President Islam Karimov's death in August 2016 opened a new page in Uzbekistan's history. Throughout his 25-year rule, Karimov kept stepping up censorship and the persecution of independent journalists. Following his death, Karimov's prime minister for 13 years, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, became acting president in September 2016 and was then elected president in December 2016. Breaking with Uzbekistan's past, he has promised on several occasions to improve human rights, for example in his first address to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, when he said his goal was to build "a democratic state and a just society" in which "human interests come first [1]." The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has been able to pay his first-ever visit to the country while a Human Rights Watch delegation was allowed back in the country following the closure of its bureau in 2011. Political prisoners have also been released, starting with the longest-held of Uzbekistan's imprisoned journalists, **Muhammad Bekjanov**, who had spent nearly 18 years in prison.

Despite these positive signs, much remains to be done in order to fully turn the page on Karimov's grim record and improve the situation of press freedom. At least ten journalists are still in jail and the intelligence services continue to pursue Uzbek independent journalists even after they have left the country. Uzbekistan has been near the bottom of RSF's World Press Freedom Index for years and is ranked 169th out of 180 countries in the 2017 Index.

1. Judicial harassment of independent journalists

Independent journalists are at risk of being imprisoned for covering sensitive topics such as forced labour in cotton farming, corruption or environmental issues. Trumped-up charges such as "extremism," "extortion" and "drug smuggling" are often brought against them. Arbitrary arrests of journalists, which were common during Karimov's presidency, have persisted under President Mirziyoyev. The victims include **Bobomurod Abdullayev**, a journalist who has worked for *Radio Ozodlik* (the Uzbek Service of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*) and the Institute for War and Peace

Reporting (IWPR). Two days after his family reported him missing in September 2017, he resurfaced in the custody of the Uzbek National Security Service (SNB). He was denied access to his lawyer.

Journalists also continue to be subjected to prolonged detention under President Mirziyoyev. **Yusuf Ruzimuradov**, a journalist with the former opposition newspaper *Erk* who was arrested at the same time as its editor, **Muhammad Bekjanov**, is one of the longest-held journalists in the world. He has been in jail since 1999 for allegedly publishing a banned newspaper and attempting to overthrow the government. While in detention he has been subjected to torture and has reportedly contracted tuberculosis. His 15-year sentence was extended in 2014 for alleged violations of prison rules.

These cases are not isolated. At least seven other journalists are currently held in Uzbekistan's prisons:

- Held since 15 November 2015 – Barno Khudoyorova – *Khukuk Dunyasi*
- 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 – Botyrbek Eshkuziev – *Irmok*
- Held since 24 July 2002 – Gayrat Mikhliboev – *Hurriyat*

Those detained since Uzbekistan's last UPR session include **Sergei Naumov**, an independent journalist based in the western city of Urgench, who was held for 12 days at the end of September 2013 after being accused of snatching a gold chain from a woman. He was denied access to a lawyer at his hearing. His arrest followed repeated threats of dire consequences if he did not stop his work.

The relatives of independent journalists' are also being targeted. **Aziz Yusupov**, the brother of a journalist working abroad for *Radio Ozodlik*, was sentenced to eight years in prison in August 2016 for alleged "drug possession." The only evidence produced during the trial was a "confession" obtained by the defence lawyer assigned to Yusupov by the National Security Service, who told him that his conviction was inevitable and that a guilty plea would help reduce his sentence.

Said Abdurakhimov, a well-known freelance journalist who writes under the pseudonym of **Sid Yanyshev,** was also given an arbitrary sentence in June 2014 when he was fined 9.6 million soms (the equivalent of several months' salary in Uzbekistan). He was charged with working "without accreditation" and "threatening social order" following an article he wrote for the Moscow-based independent news website *Ferghana* (access to which is blocked inside Uzbekistan). It described the distress of residents of a Tashkent district who have not been compensated for homes that are being demolished so that a new motorway can be built.

2. Persecution of journalists in exile

The persecution and harassment of independent journalists by Uzbek authorities doesn't stop at Uzbekistan's borders. Journalists continue to face threats and arrest after they have fled their homeland.

The example of **Narzullo Akhunzhonov** is revealing. Forced to leave Uzbekistan in 2013 with his family, he found a temporary refuge in Turkey. However, intimidation attempts continued. Following their departure, security officials went to their former home in Tashkent where several members of their family still resided. Uzbek police managed to obtain his new telephone number in Turkey and he started to be continuously followed by two individuals. He was also visited at his new home and received threatening phone calls. Fearing for his life, he finally decided to leave Turkey with his family and seek asylum in Ukraine. However, shortly after arriving at Kiev international airport on 20 September 2017, he was arrested under an Interpol red notice issued at the request of the Uzbek authorities. They claim he fraudulently obtained 2,000 dollars in 2009 although the investigation into the allegations was not opened until nearly four years later, in 2013.

After operating for ten years, the Berlin-based leading independent news website *Uznews* was forced to cease activity in 2014 as a result of a cyber-attack by Uzbek security agents, editor in chief **Galima Bukharbayeva** announced. Her email account was hacked and confidential documents were posted online that put independent journalists in Uzbekistan at risk. One of them, **Gulasal Kamolova**, was later forced to seek asylum in France after receiving threats. She reported that, shortly before leaving the country, an official from the Uzbek Security Services warned her that they would find her wherever she went.

3. Persistent censorship

There have been some signs of greater freedom of expression and acceptance of critical reporting under President Mirziyoyev. One was the announcement by the *BBC*'s Uzbek service that it was recruiting a Tashkent-based reporter, more than a decade after its Uzbekistan bureau was closed following the Andijan massacre in 2005. Another was the first-ever public criticism of former President Karimov's policies on 30 July on the newly-launched 24-hour TV news channel *Uzbekistan 24*.

However, the short-lived introduction of live talk shows and live panel discussions, in which Uzbek officials were directly questioned by journalists, showed that, despite great hopes, steps back were also possible. Live talk shows represented an important break with Karimov's rule, under which the only live broadcasts were those of sports events such as the Olympic Games. However, in August 2017, just a few months after they were introduced, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov announced during a meeting with journalists that live programmes would be curtailed and would now be under the supervision of Hairiddin Sultanov, a presidential adviser on media affairs who already acted as such under Karimov.

Cyber-censorship has also become more refined in recent years, and is no longer limited to the blocking of websites. The authorities maintain a tight grip on the Internet, blocking access not only to independent news websites but also, more recently, to censorship circumvention tools and many instant messaging apps. Internet Service Providers and mobile phone operators have also been instructed to monitor the activities of clients and alert the authorities when "suspect" messages are circulated. The state-owned Uztelecom company continues to control all Internet access.

Recommendations

In the light of these observations, RSF urges the Uzbek authorities to:

- Free all independent journalists who are still being held, including Yusuf Ruzimuradov.
- Stop the harassment of independent journalists and their families and ensure that press freedom is respected, in accordance with the undertakings given by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.
- End the surveillance and persecution of journalists living in exile and the harassment of their relatives who are still living in Uzbekistan.
- Lift the ban on live political and current affairs programmes and ensure full implementation of article 29 of the Uzbek constitution, which guarantees everyone's "right to gather and disseminate information."
- Stop blocking independent and opposition news websites and stop using Internet Service Providers as tools for monitoring and suppressing communications.

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[1] http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57574 - .WdC4XhjpP3A