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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Uzbekistan

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Uzbekistan's legal framework ostensibly prohibits censorship and guarantees freedom of speech and the right to independent information. In practice, such protections are systematically ignored by President Islam Karimov's autocratic government, which exerts near-total control over the media. Convictions for libel and defamation can result in fines and jail time, and public insult of the president is punishable by up to five years in prison. Journalists can also face legal penalties for "interference in internal affairs" and "insulting the dignity of citizens." Uzbekistan has an access to information law on the books, but it is not enforced. The parliament, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Uzbek National Association of Electronic Media held a conference in Samarkand in October 2012 to discuss several proposed media laws, including one regarding freedom of information and another on broadcasting. However, no legislative action was taken on those proposals during 2012. Journalists working for unaccredited foreign outlets or unregistered domestic outlets are not legally recognized as journalists and risk persecution by the government.

The few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan continue to face pressure from Karimov's regime. In March 2012, investigative journalist Viktor Krymzalov was convicted of defamation and fined \$1,350 over an article concerning a pensioner's eviction that had been published without a byline on the independent Russian-language news website Centrasia.ru. Krymzalov, who had previously written critically about Uzbekistan's judiciary, denied writing the Centrasia.ru article. Yelena Bondar, another independent journalist, was found guilty in April of "promoting national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred" and ordered to pay a fine of more than \$2,000. She was punished despite having decided not to publish the article in question, which involved alleged government harassment of ethnic Russians at a university. She subsequently fled to Kyrgyzstan, where she has sought asylum. In July, independent journalists Sid Yanyshv and Pavel Kravets were arrested as they were taking photographs of a market in Tashkent, the capital, and were interrogated by police before being released hours later. The prosecutor's office in Tashkent in September called for an investigation into the incident, but no further details about such a probe have been reported.

Virtually all local media outlets are linked directly or indirectly to the state, and the National Security Service actively manipulates reports to present a carefully constructed image of the country, with occasional forays into limited criticism of local corruption. Widespread self-censorship is a serious problem, as investigative journalists fear reprisals in the form of harassment, loss of employment, or jail time.

The state-run Center for Monitoring Mass Communications monitors internet usage in Uzbekistan, reporting to a government committee with the authority to block websites that are deemed inappropriate. In May 2012, an investigation by a Swedish news program found that the Swedish telecommunications giant TeliaSonera had sold sophisticated surveillance equipment to Uzbek authorities, as well as to authorities in several other Central Asian and Eastern European nations. According to the report, the equipment allowed those governments to monitor online and telephone communications and had been used against journalists and political dissidents. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported in February that a clone website had been set up to mirror its Uzbek service, in what analysts said might have been a scheme to identify and monitor the service's users. The cloned site was shut down after RFE/RL reported on its existence. The 2012 launch of YouFace, an Uzbek alternative to the social-networking website

Facebook, also raised concerns about government surveillance.

In July 2012, Uzbek state television aired a documentary that portrayed social-networking websites including Facebook and Russia's Odnoklassniki as "weapons of outside forces." The Uzbek-language version of Wikipedia was blocked by Uzbek authorities early in the year. The blogging website LiveJournal was temporarily blocked twice in the spring, while WordPress, a similar blogging platform used by a number of Uzbek dissidents living abroad, remains inaccessible in Uzbekistan. Several foreign-based news services, including the Uzbek versions of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), RFE/RL, and Voice of America, are also blocked by authorities. In October, Uztelecom, the national internet service provider, blocked certain circumvention tools that had allowed users in Uzbekistan to bypass state censorship. Approximately 37 percent of the population used the internet in 2012.

Foreign media have been gradually expelled since the 2005 Andijon massacre, in which government troops killed hundreds of demonstrators, straining Uzbekistan's relations with democratic countries. In separate incidents in March 2012, authorities deported two journalists—BBC correspondent Natalya Antelava and Russian photojournalist Viktoriya Ivleva—without explanation following their arrival at the airport in Tashkent.

Uzbekistan is among the world's most prolific jailers of journalists. In 2012, Uzbek authorities continued to detain four journalists for political reasons: Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov of the opposition newspaper *Erk*, imprisoned since March 1999; Salijon Abdurakhmanov of the independent news website *Uznews*, imprisoned since June 2008; and freelance journalist Dilmurod Saiid, imprisoned since February 2009. Bekjanov was due to be released in January 2012, but a court sentenced him to an additional five years in prison based on questionable allegations that he had broken prison rules. *Erk* has been banned in Uzbekistan, and while *Uznews* remains active, its editor now operates from Germany. Separately, independent journalist Jamshid Karimov, who is the president's nephew, went missing in mid-January. He had been held against his will in a psychiatric clinic between 2007 and 2011, and his disappearance prompted concerns that he might have been detained again.

According to the government, there are 663 active newspapers in Uzbekistan, as well as 195 magazines, 13 periodical bulletins, 35 radio stations, and 53 television stations. Ownership of nonstate media outlets is opaque, though journalists report

that there is not a great public demand to know who owns various private outlets, as they all generally report the same version of the news. The government controls most publishing houses and printing presses. A number of regional and local television and radio stations are privately owned, and a few private printing presses produce independent publications that avoid politically sensitive topics and have limited circulation. Low pay within Uzbekistan's media industry encourages journalists to accept bribes.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

95

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

30

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

37

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

28

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