

Freedom of the Press 2012 - Uzbekistan

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2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 95

Legal Environment: 30

Political Environment: 37

Economic Environment: 28

The government of President Islam Karimov showed no respect for nominal constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press in 2011, and further restricted the internet and social media to prevent the spread of news about the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Convictions for libel and defamation can result in hefty fines and jail time, and public insult of the president is punishable by up to five years in prison. Such charges were routinely used by the government to punish and attempt to silence critical journalists as well as human rights activists and government opponents. In April 2011, Voice of America stringer Abdumalik Boboyev – who had been convicted and fined in 2010 for "libel and insulting the Uzbek people" – was denied an exit visa to travel to Germany to attend a program at the Hamburg Foundation for the Politically Persecuted. The Uzbek regime's efforts to silence the media reached outside the country when one of Karimov's daughters, Lola Tillyaeva-Karimova, filed a libel suit against a French news website, *Rue89*, that published an article calling her the daughter of a dictator in 2010. The case was dismissed by a French court in July 2011.

In August 2011, the government approved the creation of a "committee of experts on information and mass communication," comprising government employees, that would monitor the media for news that was "destructive and negative," that could weaken "national cultural traditions," or that advocated the "violent overthrow" of the government. The committee would concentrate its efforts on new media and "satellite systems."

Virtually all local media are linked either 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, and journalists fear reprisal in the form of harassment, loss of employment, or jail time. In 2011, state-controlled media provided belated and minimal coverage of major international events such as the Arab Spring and the killing of Osama bin Laden. The Uzbek media were also silent about the lavish lifestyles and real estate holdings of Karimov's daughters. Two journalists from the state-controlled Yoshlar TV, Saodat Omonova and Malokhat Eshonkulova, were fired from their jobs in 2010 for protesting against corruption and censorship at the station. They began a hunger strike on June 27, 2011, Uzbekistan's national Media Day, to protest their dismissal and management practices including prescreening of reports, suppression of criticism of officials, and reliance on state news services. They were pressured to call off their protest, and remained unemployed at year's end.

In a major blow to press freedom in 2011, authorities in November ordered the closure of the decade-old *Zerkalo XXI*, one of the few independent newspapers left in the country, on charges of violating the law on advertising and other business-related offenses. Media observers said the closure was likely motivated by the paper's publication of articles that challenged the government.

Because there are only a few independent journalists remaining in Uzbekistan, harassment of reporters is rare. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, five journalists remained behind bars for political reasons as of December 1, 2011. One of them, Muhammad Bekjanov, a former editor of the opposition newspaper *Erk* who had been imprisoned since 1999, faced an additional five years in prison at year's end; his original sentence was set to expire in January 2012. Following intervention by foreign democratic governments, journalist Jamshid Karimov, the president's nephew, was released from psychiatric incarceration in November 2011; he had been held since 2006 for contributing to banned internet publications. His whereabouts were unknown at year's end. In one case of harassment in 2011, independent journalist Elena Bondar was briefly detained at Tashkent airport in August as she returned from an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) journalism training course in Kyrgyzstan. Authorities seized digital media devices that she was carrying, on the basis that they were undeclared goods. Bondar was cleared of possessing illegal content, and the confiscated materials were returned to her in September, but the incident was seen as a warning against engaging in such trainings and independent journalism in general.

While an estimated 1,100 media outlets operate in Uzbekistan, the government controls most national dailies and four television stations, as well as the publishing houses and printing presses that handle the majority of the country's print media. However, there are a number of privately owned regional and local television and radio stations, and a few private printing presses produce independent publications that avoid politically sensitive topics and have a very limited circulation. The government does not permit foreign outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), or Voice of America to broadcast from within Uzbekistan. According to the independent online publication *Fergananews.com*, the foreign press corps has shrunk from 88 journalists before the 2005 Andijon massacre – in which government troops fired on demonstrators, reportedly killing hundreds and straining Uzbekistan's relations with democratic countries – to 33 or less today. Even some of those who were accredited by the government have left the country.

Approximately 30 percent of the population used the internet in 2011, but many users access the medium in institutional and public settings, where state controls and surveillance hamper their

ability to obtain independent perspectives on the events in the country. Users report that the government routinely blocks the websites of RFE/RL, the BBC's Uzbek service, EurasiaNet, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and various Uzbek- and Russian-language human rights, opposition, and religious sites. Just prior to the celebrations marking Uzbekistan's 20th independence anniversary in August, several major websites were also temporarily blocked, including the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, Reuters, Bloomberg, and several Russian-based news sites, as well as the search engine Google and Reporters Without Borders. There has been a surge in membership on Facebook and other social-networking sites in recent years. While social-media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LiveJournal could be reached during 2011, there were reports that some groups and accounts within those sites were blocked.

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