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Attacks on the Press 2009 - Kyrgyzstan

Top Developments

- Saipov murder case unsolved and beset by questions.
- Four journalists badly beaten; no arrests made.

Key Statistic

- 76: Percentage of vote won by Kurmanbek Bakiyev in flawed presidential election.

The press climate deteriorated in this mountainous central Asian nation that once offered promise for democracy and free expression. The government's erratic investigation into the unsolved 2007 murder of editor Alisher Saipov stained the nation's law enforcement and press freedom record. At least four critical reporters were brutally attacked, and one fled the country in the face of continuing threats. An independent Russian-language newspaper closed after its staffers received anonymous threats.

President Kurmanbek Bakiyev won his second term in a vote that was harshly criticized by domestic and international observers. The July 23 election fell short of democratic standards, according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which cited ballot-stuffing, intimidation of opposition supporters, coercion of government employees, and biased media coverage. OSCE monitors said state-controlled news media produced inequitable coverage, devoting more time and space to Bakiyev than to his challengers. Bakiyev also enjoyed largely positive coverage, the OSCE found, in contrast to the critical reporting devoted to his opponents.

The Elections Commission declared Bakiyev the winner, with 76 percent of the vote, over former Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev and four other candidates, according to local and international press reports. Atambayev and his backers said the government had rigged the vote, and they refused to recognize the results, according to Radio Azattyk, the Kyrgyz Service of the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Free Liberty.

Although media are diverse by regional standards, most residents get news from the state-controlled broadcaster National Television and Radio Corporation (KTR), CPJ research shows. Legislation passed in 2008 gave Bakiyev broad authority over KTR policy-making, allowing him to appoint KTR's general director and all members of its supervisory board. The OSCE estimated that about 400 newspapers are published regularly, most of them in regional centers and the capital. Although the government does not directly control independent newspaper content, self-censorship is pervasive due to the impunity that is common in attacks on the press, CPJ research shows. Most international estimates have put Internet penetration in the single digits, although the Bishkek-based nonprofit, the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy, announced in September that penetration had reached about 14 percent. Parliament has discussed an Internet regulation bill, but no legislation has advanced.

Seen as an ally of press freedom when he took power in 2005 after a popular uprising, Bakiyev continued to offer encouraging statements about the role of news media. He told journalists at a February press conference in Bishkek that they are the country's "fourth estate" and that his administration took seriously critiques in the press, the independent news agency 24.kg reported. "Nobody is repressing you, and you say what you want," Bakiyev said.

But his assertions were undercut throughout the year by attacks and intimidation aimed at critical and pro-opposition reporters and carried out with impunity.

On March 3, four unidentified assailants beat and stabbed Syrgak Abdyldayev, a political reporter and commentator for the independent newspaper *Reporter-Bishkek*, outside his office in Bishkek. Assailants broke both arms and a leg, and stabbed him more than a dozen times, Abdyldayev told CPJ. The reporter had criticized the government's economic policies and had examined the disappearance of opposition politicians. Although Interior Ministry officials said an investigation into the attack was a high priority, no progress was reported.

Abdyldayev said his attackers intended to send a threatening message to all independent and pro-opposition journalists in the run-up to the July election. "There are not many critical reporters left in the country after the murder of Alisher Saipov, and my attackers wanted to muzzle those few who continue to criticize the authorities," he told CPJ. Even as he was recovering from the attack and had little mobility, Abdyldayev said he continued to receive threats to his safety and that of his family. In July, after discovering a note at his doorstep that suggested he prepare for his funeral, Abdyldayev and his family fled the country, according to local press reports.

Three other independent journalists were attacked with impunity. In May, three men beat Yrysbek Omurzakov, editor of the independent newspaper *Tribuna*. The editor told CPJ that assailants in two sedans blocked his marked press car when he stopped at a traffic light. The attackers, who identified themselves as police officers, pulled the editor from the vehicle, shouted "beat the journalist," and pummeled him. Omurzakov told CPJ the attack occurred on a busy downtown street, in front of numerous witnesses, including traffic officers who did not intervene. According to local press reports, authorities tried to persuade Omurzakov not to press charges.

Abduvahab Moniyev, deputy editor of the pro-opposition Kyrgyz-language biweekly *Achyk Sayasat*, was attacked in June, the Bishkek-based news agency Aki-Press reported. The Moscow-based regional news Web site *Ferghana* said an unidentified caller lured Moniyev to a meeting under the pretext of having sensitive information. According to *Ferghana*, four assailants beat Moniyev at the meeting place but did not take any of his belongings. Moniyev had just begun writing a column in *Achyk Sayasat* in which he profiled and criticized local politicians.

Kubanychbek Zholdoshev, a reporter with the government weekly *Osh Shamy*, suffered a concussion and broken ribs in November when three assailants beat him as he was walking along a street in Osh. Zholdoshev had been left stranded moments earlier when traffic police stopped the taxi in which he was riding and began questioning the driver. Osh police dismissed the beating as a random act of street thugs, but CPJ sources disputed the account. Almaz Ismanov, a local analyst for the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, told CPJ that Zholdoshev had just been threatened in connection with an article detailing student protests over poor education and corruption at Osh State University.

One independent newspaper shut down in the face of threats. Bermet Bukasheva, chief editor of the Bishkek-based weekly *Litsa* (Faces), told *Ferghana* in March that she closed the newspaper after receiving intimidating messages from anonymous callers – and seeing that the attack on Abdyldayev had been carried out with impunity.

The greatest blot on the government's record was its continued failure to solve the 2007 murder of Alisher Saipov, the 26-year-old editor of the Uzbek-language newspaper *Siyosat* (Politics). Saipov was shot at close range outside his downtown office in Osh in October 2007. Colleagues told CPJ that Uzbek security agents might have been involved in the murder. Saipov, a Kyrgyz citizen of Uzbek ethnicity, had aggressively covered

Uzbekistan's political scene. A month before his slaying, state-controlled Uzbek media had smeared Saipov in publications and broadcasts, and the journalist reported being followed by Uzbek security agents.

The integrity of the government's investigation has been undermined by recurring problems: Saipov's family told CPJ they have been consistently kept in the dark; investigators have been shuffled on and off the case; prosecutors twice tried to close the investigation in 2008.

The case took another strange twist in April 2009, when authorities said they had found the murder weapon and identified it as belonging to a drug dealer whom they had detained in southern Kyrgyzstan, *Ferghana* reported. Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiyev announced the development at a Bishkek press conference but did not name the suspect, disclose any charges against him, or say what role he might have played in the murder. Avaz Saipov, the journalist's father, told CPJ he had learned of the detention from news reports.

The purported break in the case immediately came under fire from skeptics who noted a striking absence of details or supporting evidence. The announcement was also directly at odds with earlier developments in the case: In 2007 and 2008, investigators said they were probing an Uzbek connection, provided news outlets with a photo of two alleged assailants, and said they had already found the murder weapon.

Court proceedings were murky at best. Avaz Saipov told CPJ that prosecutors had failed to attend three scheduled hearings. In late July, he said, a hearing was finally held, but an Osh City Court judge found insufficient evidence to proceed and ordered the case returned to investigators for additional work. Prosecutors instead filed an appeal, winning the removal of the judge and permission to proceed with the case.

Facing international skepticism, including statements from CPJ, authorities publicly identified the suspect in October as Abdufarit Rasulov. Without providing details, Olzhobai Kazabayev, a spokesman for the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry, told Radio Azattyk that investigators had made "enormous efforts" to solve the murder and had determined that Uzbek agents were not involved. The suspect denied involvement in the murder and said police had beaten him, the independent news Web site *Uznews* reported.

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