

Title	Attacks on the Press 2009 - Uzbekistan
Publisher	Committee to Protect Journalists
Country	Uzbekistan
Publication Date	16 February 2010
Cite as	Committee to Protect Journalists, <i>Attacks on the Press 2009 - Uzbekistan</i> , 16 February 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b7bc2da32.html [accessed 26 July 2010]

Attacks on the Press 2009 - Uzbekistan

Top Developments

- Nation is a persistent jailer of journalists.
- Security agents enforce rigid censorship.

Key Statistic

- 4: Years EU human rights sanctions were in place before being lifted in 2009.

President Islam Karimov's authoritarian government held at least seven journalists in prison, retaining its notorious distinction as the region's leading jailer of journalists. Authorities harassed independent journalists, blocked critical news Web sites, and retained their tight grip on traditional media. Lawyers who defended journalists found themselves the targets of state retaliation as the country's judicial system grew more punitive. While authorities kept a stranglehold on free expression at home, Uzbek diplomats insisted that their country's actions were consistent with democratic principles.

Karimov, who rose to leadership in Uzbekistan under Soviet rule, marked two decades in power in June. While proclaiming himself a democrat after the demise of the Soviet Union, his policies have consistently reflected authoritarian traditions. His regime has imprisoned its critics and forced them into exile, violated human rights, and brought the country's once-vibrant independent press to near extinction.

Government figures show more than 1,100 domestic media outlets. Although most are technically independent from the state, agents with the Uzbek security service, known as the SNB, censor print and broadcast reports before they reach the public, CPJ research shows. In March, SNB representatives held a series of meetings with Uzbek editors in the capital, Tashkent, to direct them to endorse government policies and to avoid critical reporting, the independent regional news Web site *Voice of Freedom* reported.

Topics such as corruption, terrorism, religious extremism, the environment, health care, and women's rights are discussed on talk shows and news programs, but only at the initiative and with the permission of the SNB, according to CPJ sources, all of whom requested anonymity for fear of reprisal. Sources said news and talk shows address topical issues in general terms only, and do not critically scrutinize named officials. Critical coverage of Karimov and his family is forbidden. Fear of losing a job, being exposed to harassment by SNB agents, or going to jail on fabricated charges contribute to widespread self-censorship among local journalists, sources told CPJ.

CPJ sources said authorities continued to block critical and independent news Web sites inside the country. A number of regional news Web sites – including *Ferghana*, *Uznews*, *Centrasia*, *EurasiaNet*, *Voice of Freedom*, *Lenta*, *Newsru*, and those associated with the BBC Uzbek Service, the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle – were inaccessible in Uzbekistan throughout the year. Authorities also blocked online access to WordPress, the blog publishing platform, those sources said.

In February, Samarkand regional prosecutors arrested Dilmurod Saiid, a journalist and human rights activist, on trumped-up charges of extortion and forgery, *Ferghana* reported. The journalist had written about corruption in government agricultural programs and had helped the Tashkent-based rights group Ezgulik defend farmers' rights. Several witnesses recanted their statements against Saiid, defense lawyer Ruhiddin Komilov said. But in a closed proceeding in July – without a defense lawyer in attendance – Saiid was sentenced to 12 and a half years in prison. During the proceedings, Komilov was stripped of his license to practice law under a new and politicized regulatory process.

Based on a 2008 law governing the practice of law, the government decreed in March that all lawyers must pass a state exam and obtain membership in the newly formed, state-controlled Chamber of Lawyers, *Ferghana* reported. The chamber effectively replaced the Lawyers Association of Uzbekistan, an independent professional organization. CPJ sources and press reports said that Komilov and Rustam Tulyaganov, both of whom had defended independent journalists, lost their licenses after supposedly failing the state-administered exam.

Uzbek authorities briefly imprisoned two other journalists in 2009. In February, a court in eastern Uzbekistan sentenced independent journalist Kushodbek Usmon to six months in jail on criminal charges of defamation and insult after he published an article critical of local police, *Voice of Freedom* said. After his release in July, Usmon told RFE/RL that he had been tortured in prison. In August, Uzbek border guards detained Shukhrat Shodiyev, a Tajik reporter who had contributed to the Dushanbe-based news agency Asia Plus and to *Ferghana*. Authorities took Shodiyev from a train after they found his press card, Tajik-language newspapers, a copy of the Quran, and compact discs with Chechen music, he later told *Ferghana*. He told *Ferghana* he was questioned at length about his work as a journalist and the reasons for a trip he had just taken to Chechnya. Shodiyev was freed in September as part of a presidential amnesty.

Less fortunate were the seven writers and editors still held when CPJ conducted its annual worldwide census of imprisoned journalists on December 1. CPJ research shows that the Karimov regime has been a persistent jailer of journalists throughout the decade. In one case, authorities forced a freelance reporter – Dzhamshid Karimov, the president's nephew – into a psychiatric hospital without a court order or medical diagnosis. Regional authorities snatched Karimov from the street in his hometown of Jizzakh in September 2006, and continued to hold him in a ward in Samarkand, sources told CPJ.

Despite this ongoing repression, the European Union lifted an arms embargo imposed in 2005 after Uzbek government troops killed hundreds of protesters in the eastern city of Andijan. The EU said authorities had made some progress on human rights – releasing some jailed political prisoners and introducing habeas corpus rights – but its October decision appeared to be based largely on geopolitical realities. EU officials apparently saw diminishing value in isolating the Karimov regime. Uzbekistan has vast oil and gas reserves – and markets in Russia and China, where leaders valued the natural resources more than Uzbekistan's human rights record.

In talks with the EU, Uzbek diplomats had aggressively defended their country's policies, suggesting that the constitution ensures human rights, RFE/RL reported. International rights activists criticized the EU's decision. "The EU has effectively abandoned the cause of human rights in Uzbekistan," Human Rights Watch said in a statement.

No journalists were killed in Uzbekistan, although a number of regional reporters and rights defenders suspected that Uzbek state agents were behind the 2007 slaying of editor Alisher Saipov in the Kyrgyzstan border town of Osh. Saipov, an ethnic Uzbek, had fiercely criticized human rights violations in Uzbekistan. The case remained unsolved, although officials in Kyrgyzstan said in 2009 that Uzbek security agents had nothing to do with the murder.

Copyright notice: © Committee to Protect Journalists. All rights reserved. Articles may be reproduced only with permission from CPJ.
