

Title	Freedom of the Press 2009 - Uzbekistan
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Uzbekistan
Publication Date	1 May 2009
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom of the Press 2009 - Uzbekistan</i> , 1 May 2009, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b2741ef24.html [accessed 26 July 2010]

Freedom of the Press 2009 - Uzbekistan

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29 (of 30)

Political Environment: 38 (of 40)

Economic Environment: 26 (of 30)

Total Score: 93 (of 100)

(Lower scores = freer)

Covers events that took place between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2008.

In the aftermath of an intense government crackdown, the media landscape remained desolate in 2008. President Islam Karimov secured a third term in a flawed December 2007 election, despite a constitutional limit of two consecutive terms. His government reached out to the European Union (EU) in an effort to reduce the country's international isolation, staging human rights and press freedom conferences in June and October while refusing to allow local journalists or press freedom activists to participate in the events.

Uzbek authorities show no respect for nominal constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and restrictions on prepublication censorship, and criticism of the president is a crime punishable by up to five years in prison. Libel is also criminal offense, but very few journalists have been prosecuted under this law, as most independent reporters have either fled the country or censored themselves. After a new media resolution tightened controls in 2006, President Karimov approved legislation in January 2007 that holds the media accountable for "objectivity" and defines websites as media outlets, thereby requiring them to register annually with the Ministry of Information and submit regular content reports to the authorities.

The government used aggressive harassment and intimidation to influence the media. In October, a court in the western city of Nukus sentenced reporter Solijon Abdurakhmanov of the independent website Uznews.net to 10 years in prison on drug charges after he reported on environmental abuses in the Aral Sea and allegations of widespread local government corruption. In an effort to improve the country's poor relations with the EU, the authorities in February pardoned independent journalist Umida Niyazova, who had been jailed the previous year in retaliation for reporting on a 2005 massacre of civilians by security forces in the city of Andijon. Five other journalists remained behind bars for political reasons, including Dzhamshid Karimov, an independent journalist who has been held in a psychiatric hospital since 2006. Authorities also failed to investigate credible allegations that Uzbek security officers were involved in the 2007 assassination in Kyrgyzstan of Alisher Saipov, an ethnic Uzbek who edited the Uzbek-language newspaper *Siosat*, which was critical of President Karimov.

International journalists were also subject to government pressure. Uzbek authorities

have undertaken a concerted campaign against foreign-funded media since the outbreak of domestic unrest in 2005, and local reporters are formally forbidden from working for international outlets. In 2008, the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Voice of America remained unable to broadcast from within Uzbekistan. In a bid to intimidate journalists working for foreign media, several government-controlled television stations in June broadcast documentary-style programs that depicted local RFE/RL journalists as criminals conspiring against the country. Authorities also tried denying accreditation to the few remaining local journalists working for foreign media and then threatened to prosecute them for working without proper accreditation.

The government in 2008 continued to control most national dailies and television stations, as well as the publishing houses and printing presses that are responsible for the majority of the country's print media. A few private printing presses produced independent publications that avoided politically sensitive topics and had a very limited circulation. Virtually all media were linked either directly or indirectly to the state and were manipulated by the government to present a carefully constructed image of the country, with occasional forays into limited criticism. Security officers regularly visited editorial offices to distribute lists of approved topics. While it is relatively straightforward to enter the media business, as taxes and licensing fees are not exorbitant, outlets with 30 percent or more foreign ownership are prohibited from operating at all, and the need to pay reregistration fees each year is a constant disincentive.

The authorities appeared to step up their efforts to squelch freedom of speech online in 2008. While exiled Uzbek journalists were able to operate news sites from abroad with a focus on human rights issues, authorities blocked access to these sites, especially if they reported on the Andijon massacre or the murder of Alisher Saipov. Blocking efforts extended beyond websites with materials that were critical of the government to include tools with which users could retain their privacy online, including proxies and anonymizers. Although 8.8 percent of the Uzbek population is estimated to use the internet (a relatively high percentage by regional standards), many users access the medium in institutional settings where state controls and the possibility of surveillance cripple their ability to obtain independent perspectives on events inside the country.

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved
