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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Uzbekistan

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 30

Political Environment: 37

Economic Environment: 27

Total Score: 94

The government of President Islam Karimov showed no respect for nominal constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press in 2010, but after international criticism, the sentences of some journalists facing jail time were annulled or converted to fines. Criticism of the president is a crime punishable by up to five years in prison, and individuals can also be prosecuted under the loosely defined charge of "defamation of the Uzbek people." In January, prosecutors summoned a number of journalists to warn them of criminal penalties if they continued their critical reporting. Umida Akhmedova was sentenced for insulting the Uzbek people through her documentaries and photographs depicting Uzbek village life, which were part of a project supported by the Swiss embassy in Tashkent. Voice of America correspondent Abdumalik Boboyev and Vladimir Berezovsky, a correspondent for *Parlamentskaya Gazeta* and editor of the Russian-language news site Vesti.uz, were sentenced on similar charges. All three were tried and convicted based on analysis of their work by the official Center for Media Monitoring, part of the Uzbek Agency for Communications. After international protests, Akhmedova and Berezovsky were amnestied, and Boboyev was fined \$11,000 rather than jailed; his sentence was confirmed upon appeal.

Widespread self-censorship is a serious problem, as journalists fear reprisal in the form of harassment, loss of employment, or jail time. Revelations in August 2010 by two newscasters from the state-controlled Yoshlar TV, Saodat Omonova and Malokhat Eshonkulova, provided a rare glimpse into the practice of prior censorship. The journalists told human rights activists and foreign diplomats that the state prescreened programs, censored reports that were critical of officials, and ordered reporters to use information from the government's news agency.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, six journalists remained behind bars for political reasons as of December 1, 2010, including Dzhamsid Karimov, the president's own nephew, who has been held in a psychiatric hospital since 2006, and Dilmorad Sayid, a journalist sentenced in 2009 to 12 and a half years in prison on false charges related to reporting on local corruption. Sayid is ill with tuberculosis and was denied leave to attend the funeral of his wife and child, who died in a car accident on their way to visit him in late 2009. His sentence was upheld on appeal in 2010.

While an estimated 1,100 media outlets operate in Uzbekistan, the government controls most national dailies and television stations, as well as the publishing houses and printing presses that handle the majority of the country's print media. A few private printing presses produce independent publications that avoid politically sensitive topics and have a very limited circulation. 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. In 2010, state-controlled media provided minimal coverage of major international events such as the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in neighboring Kyrgyzstan in April, violent clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan in June, and the release of classified U.S. diplomatic cables by the antisecrecy organization WikiLeaks at year's end that portrayed Karimov and his daughters in an unflattering light. The government does not permit 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 today. Even some of those who have been accredited by the government have left the country.

Although an estimated 20 percent of the Uzbek population used the internet in 2010, many users access the medium in institutional and public settings where state controls and the possibility of surveillance cripple their ability to obtain independent perspectives on events inside 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. While social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LiveJournal could be reached during the year, there were reports that some groups and accounts within those sites were blocked.

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