

TAJIKISTAN: JOURNALISTS UNDER PRESSURE AS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS APPROACH

With parliamentary elections fast approaching, print journalists in Tajikistan are coming under increasing pressure, media watchdogs say.

The pro-presidential People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) is widely expected to retain its hammerlock on parliament in the February 28 elections. Even so, media rights groups contend that President Imomali Rahmon's administration is trying to muzzle media outlets not directly under the government's control.

"There is clearly an all-out drive to intimidate news media and get them [independent media outlets] to [self-] censor their coverage of state authorities," the Paris-based group Reporters Without Borders said in a February 1 statement.

There are no daily newspapers in Tajikistan. Of late, independent-minded weeklies have had to cope with the possibility of financial devastation via lawsuits. The Reporters Without Borders statement noted one January 26 case in which a court awarded "astronomical damages" in a suit against the weekly Paykon (Arrowhead) for a report on corruption. "Such high awards threaten the publication's survival and, therefore, the diversity of the country's news media, which is already very limited," the statement said.

More recently, two Supreme Court judges and one judge from the Dushanbe City Court have brought libel suits against three independent weeklies stemming from reports in the publications about corruption in the judicial system, the Asia-Plus news agency reported on February 1. The plaintiffs are seeking approximately \$1.2 million in "moral damages," and for the newspapers' operating licenses to be suspended while the hearings proceed.

Opposition parties in Tajikistan are in disarray and are not in position to mount a serious challenge to the PDPT in the upcoming voting. But Muhiddin Kabiri, chair of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party, was quoted by Asia-Plus on February 2 as saying that the government remains wary of the ability of independent outlets to draw attention to "acute social problems, such as corruption and the inefficiency of government agencies."

"This explains the growing trend of filing legal cases against the media by the authorities," Kabiri added.

Critics have also pointed to legislation, adopted last fall, which potentially imposes onerous fees to obtain information from official sources. Specifically, the legislation, titled "On the order of payment to government agencies for the provision of information," requires journalists to pay roughly 10 cents per page for official documents obtained from government employees. The charge ostensibly covers the costs of printing.

Nuriddin Karshibaev, chairman of the National Association of Independent Media in Tajikistan, contended, in an interview with EurasiaNet, that the law violates the Tajik constitution, which guarantees access to information. At the same time, he noted that the legislation wasn't being enforced.

"So far, there haven't been any conflicts between the authorities and journalists applying for official information," said Karshibaev. "Nobody has been asked to pay for any requested data. If such a thing occurs, I believe, our colleagues would bring in a lawsuit against the government agency [that requested payment for information]."

Makhmudkhon Saraev, a representative of the Tajik president's office, insisted the legislation would not prompt government officials to charge money for interviews. "The government resolution mainly concerns the use of archive materials, whereas oral information must remain free of charge," Saraev said during a recent roundtable discussion in Dushanbe.

Lidia Isamova, a Tajik journalist and media expert, saw nothing sinister in the legislation. Given that the government is facing a severe budget crunch, it's not unusual that it would see to reduce expenses in any way possible, Isamova suggested. "Somebody has to pay for paper, printer ink, Xerox equipment, etc," Isamova said. "I don't think that any official would try to make a fortune out of such services, and no journalists would be overcharged for it".

What seems to have angered journalists most about the adoption of the legislation was the way in which it was promulgated. "Everything goes in a reverse order," said one journalist, speaking on condition of anonymity, referring to the legislative process. "A law is first adopted, and then [the public] starts discussing it."

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