

Media Watchdogs Condemn 12-Year Sentence For Tajik Journalist

Two media watchdogs have condemned a 12-year prison sentence against Tajik journalist Hairullo Mirsaidov and called for his immediate release, saying the charges against him for alleged financial crimes were politically motivated.

In a July 16 statement, the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the National Association of Independent Mass Media in Tajikistan (NANSMIT) said Mirsaidov's sentence **was** "an extremely grave threat to press freedom in Tajikistan."

Mirsaidov was sentenced by a Tajik court on July 11 after being found guilty of embezzling and misusing state funds, and of making false reports to police.

The 39-year-old Mirsaidov said the case against him was retaliation for his critical reporting about government corruption.

Mirsaidov's arrest in December 2017 came shortly after he published an open letter accusing senior officials of corruption in Tajikistan's northern province of Sughd.

"Despite the official denials, the extraordinary severity of this sentence shows that this trial was politically motivated," said Johann Bihr, the head of RSF's Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk.

"We call for Hairullo Mirsaidov's immediate release and for an impartial review of the case on appeal," he said. "We also urge the Tajik authorities to guarantee the primacy of the law and the freedom to do investigative reporting on matters in the public interest."

NANSMIT director Nuriddin Karshiboev said: "We followed Hairullo Mirsaidov's trial closely and we saw how his criticism of corruption rebounded on him. This verdict has buried all hope of combatting corruption. No one will now dare to draw attention to corrupt behavior."

Mirsaidov is an independent journalist and a former correspondent of Asia-Plus and Germany's Deutsche Welle radio.

Mirsaidov also leads Tajikistan's team for KVN, a stand-up-comedy competition that originated among university students in the Soviet Union and is still popular in many former Soviet republics.

His case has drawn international attention, with London-based Amnesty International **describing** him as "a prisoner of conscience who is being punished solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression."

In New York, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) **said** journalists like Mirsaidov "should be recognized for the important work they do, not locked up on bogus charges."

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