



Freedom of the Press 2007

Draft Country Reports and Ratings

May 1, 2007

Uzbekistan

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 37

Economic Environment: 25

Total Score: 91

The Uzbek government does not respect freedom of speech and the press, despite nominal constitutional guarantees. A new media resolution in 2006 tightened a system of laws that already allowed penalties of up to five years in prison for publicly criticizing the president. Other ambiguously phrased statutes broadly prohibited incitement of religious or ethnic strife and statements advocating the subversion or overthrow of the constitutional order.

After domestic unrest in 2005, the Uzbek authorities undertook a concerted campaign against foreign-funded media, and in 2006 the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Voice of America remained unable to broadcast from within Uzbekistan. In March, a government-controlled website published the text of a February cabinet resolution with “basic rules regulating the professional activities of foreign media correspondents in Uzbekistan.” The resolution stressed that foreign correspondents were forbidden “to insult the honor and dignity of Uzbek citizens, [or] to interfere in their personal lives.” It also expressly forbade the “professional activities of Uzbek citizens in the capacity of representatives of foreign media who/that have not received accreditation through the Uzbek Foreign Ministry.” Meanwhile, on the domestic front, virtually all media were controlled either directly or indirectly by the state, and the government used them to present a positive distortion of reality in the country with occasional forays into carefully controlled criticism.

While there was little independent media activity left in the wake of the government’s repressive efforts in 2005, harassment continued in 2006. In January, rights activist Saidjahon Zainabiddinov was reportedly sentenced to a seven-year prison term for speaking with foreign journalists about the Uzbek security services’ violent suppression of a small uprising in Andijon in May 2005. Deutsche Welle correspondent Obid Shabanov was stripped of his accreditation in March for an allegedly inaccurate story, and was warned about new regulations on unaccredited representatives of foreign

media. Harassment prompted Alo Khojayev to shut down the independent news website Tribune-uz.info in July. Also that month, six journalists were fired from their jobs at state-owned media outlets for freelancing with foreign or independent publications, including Tribune-uz.info. In September, independent journalist Jamshid Karimov, a nephew of President Islam Karimov, was reportedly placed in a psychiatric hospital and remained there at year's end. In October, a court sentenced independent journalist Ulughbek Haydarov to a six-year prison term for extortion, but he was released in November. He had reported on local government corruption. Sobirdjon Yakubov, a journalist with the newspaper *Hurriyat* who had been jailed in 2005 after calling for democratic reforms, was released in April and allowed to return to work.

There are no private publishing houses or printing presses, and the establishment of new periodicals is subject to political approval. The government in 2006 continued to control national dailies and television stations, which routinely denounced foreign-funded media as aggressors in an "information war" against Uzbekistan and portrayed Western-style democratization as a plot to undermine Uzbek identity. With foreign-funded broadcast media barred from the country, the internet was a critical source of information, and a number of exiled Uzbek journalists were able to operate news sites from abroad with a focus on rights issues. However, the total number of internet users was less than one million (in a country of over 26 million people), and consistent reports indicated that the authorities tried to block critical news and opposition sites, although some remained available through proxy servers. An Uzbek court in January 2006 suspended Freedom House's operations in the country, finding that the group had provided internet access without a license.