Cyber-Censorship in Uzbekistan

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Blocking of IWPR website latest reflection of Tashkent's fear of free-flowing information.

The authorities in Tashkent have blocked access to the website of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, one of the last remaining sources of independent news still accessible inside Uzbekistan.

The move is especially regrettable as it came on the eve of **World Day Against Cyber-Censorship**, and underlined the importance of that event.

IWPR's site joins the ranks of several dozen websites to which access is blocked in Uzbekistan, including the BBC, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, Eurasianet.org, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Ferghana.ru, Uznews.net and the Russian human rights group Memorial, all of which cover events in Central Asian state.

Officials in Uzbekistan say the country has over 1,200 media outlets of its own, but their news content is fairly uniform, uncritical and follows the government line. In recent years, the internet has taken off as a source of alternative information, especially among younger people.

While the practice of blocking website access is common in Uzbekistan, it is unclear why the IWPR site has been targeted at this particular time. There are several possibilities.

One is that a story currently on the site's front page, called **Unique Insights From Central Asia**, features a picture of TV journalists protesting, ironically enough, against censorship of the Uzbek media.

"The official press gives out extremely sparse and selective information about this subject," a journalism student in Tashkent said. "It's only on the internet that we can read the truth."

Another possible reason is our extensive coverage of the unrest in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, which Uzbek officials may feel is inappropriate for a local readership. The uncomfortable parallels have certainly been noted in Tashkent, as local web users report difficulties getting into popular social networking sites since early February. After people in Uzbekistan began discussing the Middle Eastern protests, linking to full-text reports on others' pages, and adding their own comments on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Livejournal, these pages stopped loading properly, although the websites are still available in principle. (See **Tashkent Spooked by Web Interest in Arab Protests** .)

Censoring the web is just one element in the government's all-out campaign against the expression of alternative views.

Local human rights defenders say the National Security Service has a whole department that specialises in trawling the web to identify "hostile" sources of news, analysis and comment on Uzbekistan. Armed with that information, the security agency then instructs the state-run internet provider UzPAK to filter and block sites.

According to Bahodir Namozov, head of the Association of Prisoners of Conscience in Tashkent, "The authorities are afraid that hidden facts about their ruinous policies might come out via the internet."

An internet expert in Tashkent said the SNB web censorship department also monitors email and chat systems. These surveillance techniques led to the popular forum Arbuz.com being partially blocked in January and a number of its users arrested. They had taken part in online discussions about Uzbekistan, Islam, and last year's ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan.

What the government fails to note, however, is that internet use has grown to such a scale that it simply cannot be controlled any more. Around a quarter of Uzbekistan's 28 million people already have access to the web, and despite low living standards the percentage is forecast to rise rapidly.

Attempting to shut off the internet is no longer possible; curtailing access to undesirable parts of it is increasingly difficult. Doing so will merely prompt keen users to find technical ways round the blocks. Plenty of young people in Uzbekistan are au fait with proxy servers and programmes that get round filters.

As one young web expert called Aziz put it, "The more they tighten the screws, the greater the interest in 'virtual resistance'."

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