

Enemy of the Press

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Kazak leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has declared war on the independent media

President of Kazakstan Nursultan Nazarbaev's latest condemnation of the independent press has won him a dubious accolade.

The Committee to Protect Journalists decided to include Nazarbaev in its annual list of the "Ten Worst Enemies of the Press" after he threatened journalists reporting deteriorating social and economic conditions in the country.

"Do you think we will sit and do nothing? You are very mistaken. Enough slandering of Kazakhstan, I warn you all," he said.

Repression of the independent media has been worsening for the last couple of years, but some have preferred to blame overzealous security services and officials rather than Nazarbaev himself.

The president's latest remarks are significant, as they provide the strongest indication yet that he is orchestrating the crackdown.

But for some, Nazarbaev's inclusion in the CPJ list will come as a surprise.

Coming to power on the wave of Perestroika, Nazarbaev was relatively tolerant of the independent media in the first few years of his rule.

In the years 1991-1995, the independent press in Kazakstan went through a genuine renaissance. Dozens of television and radio stations, newspapers and magazines were launched. At the same time, journalists became more professional and there was an improvement in the quality of the media.

Newspapers and broadcasters reported on the country's social and economic crisis, the impoverishment of the population and opposition criticism of the authorities.

By 1995, audiences for local independent media and the Russian television channels, ORT and RTR, were outstripping those for the official Kazak media.

The president and his entourage, concerned they were losing control of public opinion, hit back.

The state auctioned broadcast frequencies in an apparent effort to close stations critical of the authorities. Re-broadcasting of RTR was halted and OTR was restricted. And a new state television channel, headed by the president's daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva, was launched.

Newspapers were the next target. Independent newspapers, critical of the regime, were bought up by the authorities. Publications, which resisted such buy-outs, were forced to close. Fifteen papers were shut

down on the eve of the presidential elections.

By the beginning of the presidential election campaign in 1998, over 90 per cent of the media, in one way or another, was controlled by the head of state and his entourage.

The regime's monopolisation of the media didn't end with the elections. The number of media enterprises headed by the president's daughter increased. These included the national broadcasting television companies Khabar, NTK and KTK, the production companies Gala TV and Telefabrika, the radio stations Khabar (Hit-FM), Europa Plus Kazakhstan, Russkoe Radio, and the newspapers Novoe Pokolenie, Stolichnoe Obozrenie and Karavan.

More recently, the authorities have turned on the opposition press, exerting bureaucratic and economic pressures on three publications, 21st Century, Nachnyom s Ponedelnika and SolDat.

As printing houses in Kazakhstan refuse to print them, some are forced to publish abroad. But even then the opposition publications are hampered by distribution problems. Under pressure from the authorities, official wholesalers refuse to carry them. And police have sometimes intervened to prevent private distribution.

Other regime tactics include tax investigations and libel cases, the latter often leading to newspaper bankruptcies. Such a fate befell the Dozhivyom do Ponedelnika and Dat. At present, the Nachnyom s Ponedelnika, which is defending several cases, is on the brink of closure.

Nazarbaev is now seeking to persuade the population that the press should serve national interests, that is his interests. "Get in line. In order to meet those national interests. All of you," he commanded.

These chilling remarks reminded many of the president's communist past and reinforced the growing conviction that he views the media as nothing but an instrument of power.

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