

Journalist's Murder Sets Back Free Speech in Central Asia

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The killing of Alisher Saipov may deter others from reporting on sensitive topics, and some of his colleagues think that is why he was gunned down.

The murder of Alisher Saipov, a noted journalist in southern Kyrgyzstan, is a major setback to the right to report freely in Central Asia, especially on the sensitive political situation in Uzbekistan.

Saipov, 26, was killed by three gunshots on the evening of October 24 in the centre of Osh, the major city in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan, where the political climate is more liberal than its neighbours, has been left in shock by the deliberate targeting of a high-profile journalist. No arrests have been made, but many commentators believe Saipov was eliminated because of his critical reporting on the regime in Uzbekistan.

He worked with Fergana.ru, a major Russian-language website covering Central Asia, as well as with Radio Liberty and Voice of America. Earlier this year, he founded an Uzbek-language newspaper Siyosat (Politics) that covered events in Uzbekistan as well as his native Kyrgyzstan.

According to Aziza Abdurasulova, a human rights activist in Kyrgyzstan, Siyosat was very popular in the Fergana Valley region of Uzbekistan, next door to Osh.

The murder was condemned around the world as well as in Kyrgyzstan.

"I am shocked and saddened by the brutal assassination of Alisher Saipov - one of the most promising young journalists from Kyrgyzstan, well known in his country and abroad," said Miklos Haraszti, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

Hulkar Isamova, an Osh journalist who produces the Rezonans programme on the local Mezon television station, told IWPR that Saipov's death had made many local journalists think about their own security.

"As a human being, I am afraid and I shudder every time I get a phone call, but as a journalist I do not get intimidated by that. In contrast, it has made us angry and we have rallied together," she said.

Like many others, Isamova believes it is no coincidence that Saipov was silenced in the run-up to the Uzbek presidential election scheduled for December 23, to prevent alternative viewpoints being heard.

Many analysts and journalists suspect the hand of the Uzbek secret service. Saipov had reported being threatened on several occasions, and the state-controlled media in Uzbekistan had run what looked like a concerted campaign to blacken his reputation.

"They wanted to kill Saipov long ago. He was a serious obstacle to the regime in Uzbekistan. But this killing

by the Uzbek intelligence services was also a deterrent for other journalists,” said Isamova.

The Uzbek authorities have not commented on Saipov’s death.

Edil Baisalov, a leading Kyrgyz politician, said, “Now that Saipov has been killed, there is one less source of accurate information from Central Asia. This killing is not simply retribution for his journalistic activity, it is a warning to others. The bloodthirsty, dictatorial regime is saying, ‘We have a long reach.’”

Baisalov says that message is intended first and foremost for journalists in Osh, an area with a large ethnic Uzbek population. “It is also a signal to the international journalists including foreigners who work here. In the run-up to the presidential election, those journalists and human rights activists who have based their press centres in Kyrgyzstan and Osh because of the liberal regime have realised how dangerous it is to work there,” he said.

Ulughbek Babakulov, chief editor of the human rights newspaper Golos Svobody (Voice of Freedom) knew Saipov personally, and says the way the murder was carried out, as a very public hit, suggests it was designed to intimidate others.

“If they’d simply wanted to get rid of him, they would have done it in secrecy. But he was shot in the city centre during the daytime, with a loud noise as they didn’t use a silencer,” said Babakulov. “This was done so as to scare journalists and indeed everyone who tries to stand up to the regime in Uzbekistan.”

Babakulov fears that many local journalists will stop working as a result, but he believes information will keep flowing, “There will be people who continue to say what is going on there. They are mainly western journalists, or people who have managed to get to the West and work independently – they will keep writing about what’s happening in Uzbekistan.”

Inside Uzbekistan, he added, “there have been no independent journalists for a long time, so there won’t be any independent coverage of the elections or reporting about what’s actually going on there”.

Baisalov agrees that “the intimidation is taking place especially for the election period”.

No one is in any doubt who will win the election – the incumbent president Islam Karimov. A handful of other candidates are standing but they are minor figures whose nominations have been sanctioned by the regime to create a show of political competition.

Officials in Tashkent have been unusually tight-lipped about this year’s ballot, announcing a firm date more or less at the last possible moment. One possible explanation is that it is not easy to explain why Karimov has the constitutional right to stand at all.

The president, who has been in power since Soviet times, began the first of two five-year terms to which he was entitled back in 1991. He stayed on through a series of constitutional fixes prolonging his term in office. In the past, Uzbek officials were generally up front about the various changes, and were at pains to explain why they should be seen as legitimate.

Now the range of legal mechanisms seems to have been exhausted, and with them the answers to difficult questions posed by critics like Saipov.

Abdirasulova is convinced that the Uzbek authorities will attempt to close off any source of information and debate about this sensitive vote.;

“In my opinion, there will be minimal coverage of the presidential election inside Uzbekistan,” she said. “He [Saipov] at least had an opportunity to write about what was going on there from Kyrgyzstan, but in the wake of his death, the Uzbek authorities will most likely not allow any criticism. Thus the screws are being tightened to the extreme.”

The BBC correspondent in Central Asia, Natalia Antelava, agrees that Saipov’s death leaves a big gap in reporting on the Uzbek election.

“I think his absence will have a dramatic effect on media coverage of elections in Uzbekistan because his newspaper was nearly the only media, besides the internet, that gave an alternative point of view,” she told IWPR. “For Alisher, who reported on Uzbekistan, elections naturally became the biggest story, and indeed he would have been that alternative voice that people in Uzbekistan do not have.”

The killing of a leading journalist has implications which will be felt in other Central Asian countries, too.

“Saipov’s murder shows that the price for freedom of speech in Central Asia is the life of a journalist,” said Abdurasulova. “His death is a threat to the foundations of democracy. There’s no doubt that journalists... in all the Central Asian states will be intimidated and will become less critical of existing authoritarian regimes, and of emerging ones too.

Dosym Satpaev, director of the Political Risk Assessment Group in Kazakhstan, said that while the extent of media freedom varies across Central Asia, none are really free. “This fact unites all the Central Asian states, because power in these countries is concentrated in the hands of either one individual or a small group. To preserve their power, these groups are willing to do many things, above all to control access to information.”

Actions ranging from murder to closing down websites have the same aim, said Satpaev – “removing alternative forms of information that annoy the authorities”.

Antelava added, “Alisher was one of the few who kept on doing real journalism in a region where that is dying out. Therefore, I think this [murder]... is an extremely tough blow for that small amount of freedom of speech that still exists.”

Tolekan Ismailova, who leads Citizens Against Corruption, a pressure group in Kyrgyzstan, hopes that Central Asia’s journalists will derive strength from their colleague’s death rather than being cowed by it.

“This murder will spread even greater fear in society. But I think his death should instead encourage journalists and mobilise activists because he stood for freedom of speech,” said Ismailova. “This brutal murder is a challenge to the entire journalistic community, to everyone working for free speech, and to the

entire Central Asian human rights movement.”

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Location: Central Asia
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