

## **Outspoken Uzbek Editor Dismissed**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

An Uzbek newspaper editor noted for his willingness to challenge government censorship has been sacked

Independent journalists in Uzbekistan are dismayed by the dismissal of a man widely regarded as the only remaining newspaper editor in the country capable of resisting government censorship and promoting objective reporting. The sacking of Alo Khojaev editor-in-chief of the Russian language Tashkent Pravda came despite his professed loyalty to president Islam Karimov.

Khojaev's removal came at the instigation of the mayor's office - which is one of the co-founders of the Tashkent Pravda - and, observers believe, was directly connected the paper's decision to mark Media Day in late June by creating a display of all articles rejected by the censors at their editorial offices.

Khojaev has also been the only newspaper editor in Tashkent to attend workshops and conferences on the media, where he has both lambasted the republic's system of censorship and ridiculed its more preposterous excesses. At a recent conference, hosted in Tashkent by the Soros Foundation, he described his daily struggles with print committee official Erkin Kamilov. "This unenlightened, uneducated man has been a censor for 40 years," said Khojaev. "He decides what can or cannot be printed. I cannot reason with him. He's intractable. Even talking to him makes me feel ill."

The mayor's office has also ordered Tashkent Pravda to merge with its Uzbek-language counterpart, Tashkent Hakikati. While each paper will continue to be published separately and will carry distinct content, the Tashkent Pravda will now come under Tashkent Hakikati's editor-in-chief. The edict announcing the merger, which was issued by the mayor's office on July 5, stated that staff changes would be finalised within a week.

On July 7, Khojaev ran an editorial informing readers of the impending merger and warning them of likely changes. "It is very likely, dear reader, that a few days from now you will be holding a slightly different paper in your hands," it said. That same day, the mayor's office decreed that Khojaev's would lose his job as editor-in-chief of Tashkent Pravda following the merger.

"In recent years, Tashkent Pravda has been one of very few papers looking independently at the progress of reforms in Uzbekistan," said staff journalist Yuri Chernogaev, who stressed that staff remained loyal to President Karimov, nonetheless. "All we want is to be free to comment honestly on the reforms currently underway in Uzbekistan, and the ridiculous excesses of censorship."

After the sacking, the Tashkent Journalists' Club invited Khojaev to an official meeting with his colleagues. They issued an official statement denouncing his dismissal as a repressive measure against a paper that was bold enough to be objective, but stopped short of passing a motion to send a letter of protest to the government in an attempt to stave off further repression. The meeting summed up the ambivalence of Uzbek journalists - while undoubtedly sad and angered by Khojaev's sacking, they will also want to avoid a similar fate. Khojaev himself did not attend.

Chernogaev acknowledges that Tashkent Pravda is no longer the paper it once was. Previously an international news reporter, he is now reduced to covering Uzbek agriculture, hailing record milk yields per cow and other achievements. "I hate it, but I've got a family to support," he said.

The events at Tashkent Pravda are the latest in a chain of harsh measures against the media. In March, the Samarkand Department of Print closed down the local Tajik-language Oina (Mirror) newspaper. The former editor-in-chief, Rakhim Mavloni, told us the official reason was "the publication of materials with inferences

that run contrary to the policy of [our] independent state". Mavloni insists that his paper had merely tried to present objective, fact-based news coverage, which discussed the challenges faced by Uzbekistan's Tajik community.

The censorship also extends to the broadcast media. Even minute criticism of official policy can get a newspaper or TV channel closed down. On June 28, the Cross-Agency Coordinating Committee of Uzbekistan denied a broadcasting license renewal to ALC, an Urgench-based private television company, which was shut down in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections in Uzbekistan in late 2000. The denial is final and not subject to appeal.

The only sources of unfettered information now available to the Uzbeks are rumours, the Internet, and overseas radio stations. The government has ensured Uzbek papers, TV and radio churn out only tedious, absurdly upbeat reports about Uzbekistan's impressive standard of living, fast-track economic progress and bright, prosperous future.

Independent lawyer and media watcher Karim Bakhriev believes that the government's iron grip on the media is a symptom of insecurity and a fear of its own citizens. "The government not only wants to control all material things, such as land, water, real estate, cotton and oil, but also people's thoughts," he said. "Censorship is one way of doing that. Even if the government itself is blissfully unaware of how ordinary Uzbeks really live and what problems they face, they cannot conceal this from the people themselves."

For a government which is unaccountable to its citizens and impervious to public opinion, censorship provides yet another form of leverage. Bottom of the Uzbek government's priorities is what Khojaev and others like him had been attempting to address - how the government's purported "reforms" are really affecting the common man.

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