

## **Tough Life for Tajik Journalists**

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Reporters' lives are made a misery by hostile officials and mean employers.

Journalists talked about the professional, financial and emotional strains which their profession faces in Tajikistan when they met last week to discuss setting up the first independent trade union.

Concerns ranged from personal security to low wages at the May 17 conference, which was organised by the National Association for Independent Media in Tajikistan, NAIMT, and the International Federation of Journalists.

Physical attacks on journalists are rarer than during the 1992-99 civil war, when dozens of reporters were killed. But censorship and harassment of outspoken journalists continue.

Officially there is no censorship, but the media are under constant pressure from the authorities to toe the line. They are watched carefully by the law-enforcement agencies and anyone who writes a critical piece is likely to be called in for questioning.

In a recent case, Mukhtor Bokizod, chief editor of the independent newspaper *Neru-i Sokhan*, was called into the state prosecutor's office and reprimanded in no uncertain terms after he published articles critical of a national referendum scheduled for June. The plebiscite proposes a number of changes to the constitution including allowing the current president, Imomali Rahmonov, to seek a further term in office.

Bokizod says he was told to stop publishing articles of this kind, otherwise his newspaper would be shut down.

Salla Kayhko, political and media officer with the OSCE mission in Dushanbe, says relations between officials and journalists are difficult, "Tajik journalists currently have a lot of problems with the authorities. Even in comparison with journalists in Kyrgyzstan, there are far fewer opportunities to express your opinion freely here."

One of the day-to-day problems is the difficulty of getting access to government information. The unwritten list of subjects journalists are not supposed to touch is growing longer all the time. Recently production figures for aluminium – a major export earner – and gold and silver were added. The picture is further confused because each ministry also has its own list of taboo subjects. For the interior ministry it is the number of suicides as well as information on death sentences. The health ministry won't talk about epidemics. In September last year a reporter for state TV, Suhrob Farruhshoev, was sacked after publishing an article on typhoid in Kulob, which happens to be the home region of the president and many government members.

At the same time, journalists in Tajikistan do have some freedom of expression since the country's media are less rigorously controlled than in neighbouring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The country currently has at least 20 newspapers and magazines in private hands, a significant number if still small compared with the 265 government-owned press outlets.

But journalists still run into many problems, whether it is with their right to free speech or with basic terms of employment.

“Editors often forget that their employees have labour rights and the right to freedom of expression.” Khulkar Yusupov, the executive secretary for the independent newspaper Varorud, based in Khujand in the north of the country, told IWPR.

“They sometimes violate the labour legislation, and they also dictate what to write about and in what way. Tajik journalists need union protection, not just from their employers but also from the authorities, who openly pressure reporters and conceal information.”

Journalists working in the private sector may be subject to less direct political controls, but they are more vulnerable to exploitation than their colleagues in the public sector. The state media is heavily subsidised out of government funds, so journalists often choose to work there just because they can expect a contract.

Most journalists earn between 20 to 30 US dollars a month, but even that sum is not guaranteed since most of the private companies do not offer contracts to staff. People are hired by verbal agreement, and this gives employers a free hand to dismiss them at any time. Moreover, many editorial offices keep two sets of accounts, so that the salary shown on the books may not be what the reporter actually gets – and pay may depend on the whim of the chief editor.

“I am 52 years old but I do not dare ask for sick leave or holidays,” said a journalist working on a private newspaper in Dushanbe, who asked to remain anonymous.

In a country with such high unemployment, journalists have little chance of changing career. Many work long hours and do not take holidays. Few employers offer paid annual leave, while female journalists are very unlikely to be allowed paid leave during pregnancy.

Veronika Habib Nur is the pseudonym used by a freelance journalist in Dushanbe. A 40-year-old single mother of two, she was forced to stop working three years ago, explaining, “I left because the conditions became intolerable.”

She told IWPR that she had to put up with unpredictable and long hours, sometimes working weekends – and all for a paltry 15 dollars a months.

The media meeting was a first step towards setting up a trade union. Further meetings are planned to take the idea forward.

“It can’t be done in one day,” NAIMT head Nuriddin Karshibaev told IWPR “It’s a difficult process, but it needs to start. Every journalist will be able to join the union, contribute his or her own ideas and questions, and look at real ways of improving the position.”

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