

Uzbek Journalists Pursue Dogged Anti-Censorship Campaign

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Two Uzbek journalists have been arrested and fined after staging a demonstration in their ongoing dispute with the state TV company where they formerly worked, and which they accuse of censorship.

Soadat Omonova and Malohat Eshankulova declared a hunger strike on June 27 outside the presidential offices in Tashkent and demanded a meeting with President Islam Karimov. Police promptly arrested them and whisked them away. They were each fined the equivalent of 1,500 US dollars – a massive sum in Uzbekistan – for breach of the peace and holding a public meeting without authorisation.

Their conflict with state TV, where they worked for the Yoshlar (Youth) channel, began last September with an unprecedented open letter alleging that managers censored journalistic output ahead of broadcasts. (See: **Uzbekistan: Uzbek TV Reporters Protest Censorship.**)

In December, they were dismissed from the channel after they staged a protest. They say they were driven to mount their latest action after they were persecuted by the intelligence service and stripped of their residence rights in Tashkent.

"The authorities are pretending not to notice us," Omonova said. "But we don't intend to give up – we're firmly resolved."

So far the government has not formally responded to the case. But Eshonkulova and Osmonova say they have been receiving insulting messages and death threats to their emails and mobile phones.

Eshonkulova said that when they called a doctor as they continued their hunger strike, it was a secret policeman who came to the door.

"When we felt faint and called doctors, a man, apparently an SNB [National Security Service] officer, turned up," she said. "Instead of treatment, he suggested we change our profession or leave the country and go to Europe or Russia. He said thousands of people die in Tashkent every day, so no one would notice if we died."

Another individual arrived the following day, warned the journalists not to call out doctors too often, otherwise they would be sent to a psychiatric hospital as they were mentally ill.

"This supposed doctor visited us for more than two hours without offering any treatment," Omonova said. "He warned us we'd be placed in a mental hospital, and when he left he gave us a document containing a diagnosis of 'situational psychosis'."

Muhaye Kalkonova, an employee of Yoshlar TV channel, dismissed the journalists' protest as "their personal problem".

"This issue makes me tense, and I don't want to talk about it," she added.

The state-controlled Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan refused to comment on the case.

A commentator from the Yoshlar channel said he would not comment publicly as he might get sacked for it, but he "wholeheartedly" his former colleagues' campaign against censorship and corruption.

Mutabar Tadjibaeva, an Uzbek human rights defender now living in France, thinks the authorities have been taken aback by how Osmonova and Eshonkulova have dared to stand up to them.

"They didn't expect such persistence and courage," she said.

All media in Uzbekistan are closely controlled by the state. Journalists are watched by the SNB and do not report on problems facing the country because of the real threat of arrest and imprisonment.

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