

Uzbek Press 'Bewildered' by Media Directive

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New media regulation requires journalists to inform the government of critical articles months in advance.

Uzbek journalists have expressed bewilderment at the latest attempt by the government to control the media. At a round table at the National Press Centre last month, editors were told to present a schedule of all articles censuring the government for the next year.

After coming under the media spotlight during the US-led war against terrorism in Afghanistan, the authorities have attempted to present themselves as more tolerant of dissent.

State officials have been told to make themselves more available to the press and to allow newspapers and broadcasters to run stories critical of the authorities. But telling journalists to provide descriptions of their future articles is an almost impossible task.

Round table participants called the latest move unrealistic. "How can we plan the writing of critical material in advance? How can I say, for example, that on October 5 I will criticise the work of doctors in hospital No 5?" asked the perplexed editor of one Uzbek newspaper.

President Islam Karimov's press secretary, Rustam Jumaev, told journalists attending the round table that the move was needed to "clear up misunderstandings" in the media.

The authorities say they want to ensure criticism is timely and topical. Every month or two, newspapers, magazines and television and radio stations will have to file reports to the president's press service, showing they are abiding by the plan.

The mass media has been strictly controlled by the state since independence in 1991 under a system of censorship that forbids the publication of any articles conflicting with government policies.

Jalolitdin Safoev, editor of the daily newspaper *Fidokorlar*, said journalists could not predict every topical theme and subject they would be covering, as the country's social and political life altered day-to-day, if not hour-by-hour.

But the president's press secretary said the directive was designed to deal with Uzbek journalists who tended only to criticise policies once President Karimov had addressed them himself.

As an example, he mentioned a recent presidential visit to the southern Surkhandarya region in February, where Karimov criticised the methods of the local authorities and sacked a local leader, Bakhtior Alimdjanov.

"Before the session of the Surkhandarya council of people's deputies, no journalist wrote about the problems in this region," Jumaev said. Once the president had appeared there, he added, "journalists launched a campaign of criticism".

Karim Bakhriev, a lawyer from the NGO Internews-Uzbekistan, said the new initiative only highlighted the dependence of the media on the state, which had the power to order it to criticise or praise government actions.

"Meetings with journalists to give directives - what to write, how to write - is a tradition from the communist past," Bakhriev said. "It is one of the methods the authorities use to subdue journalists, and to target their critical writing in the direction of those who are out of favour with the authorities."

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