

Uzbek Sports Journalist Accused of Islamist Leanings

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A top sports writer in Uzbekistan has been arrested and accused of Islamic fundamentalism.

Khairullo Hamidov, deputy chief editor for the sports newspaper *Champion* and a prominent TV journalist was arrested on January 21. He was charged under Article 216 of the Uzbek criminal code – “establishing an illegal religious organisation” – an offence which carries penalties ranging from a fine to five years in prison.

“Officers of the National Security Service came to our home at 5 am when everybody was asleep,” said Hamidov’s wife Dilnoza. “For four hours, they searched our home and they took away books, CDs, a computer, and a new digital camcorder. They said my husband would be held responsible for what they contained. After conducting the search, they took my husband away with them.”

Hamidov is currently in the police pretrial detention facility for Tashkent region.

Apart from his wife, relatives and Hamidov’s lawyer Alisher Zainutdinov were unavailable for comment.

Hamidov, 35, is a popular sports commentator on state television and has regular columns in the *Interfootball* and *Champion* publications.

Fellow-journalists suspect Hamidov was targeted because of his second line of work, as a writer on religious and ethical themes.

He wrote and presented a programme on religious themes that was carried by a local radio station, *Navruz*, last year.

“In his programs, Khairullo called on people, young people in particular, to lead a righteous way of life,” said a journalist who knows Hamidov. “He was speaking only about the traditional form of Islam [i.e. not more radical imported forms] and calling for a revival of lost Uzbek traditions. People were changed by his programmes”.

Media-watchers say the radio show proved so popular that CD recordings of it went on sale at markets in Uzbekistan and even neighbouring Tajikistan.

Surat Ikramov, who heads the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders based in Tashkent, says Hamidov’s radio material would by definition have been scrutinised in advance by the authorities,

given the highly controlled nature of Uzbekistan's media.

"The odd thing is that he wasn't an independent journalist," said Ikramov. "Everything Khairullo said on air had undergone rigorous censorship."

There are no truly independent media in Uzbekistan. TV and radio programmes by nominally private broadcasters, as with the state companies, go out only after being endorsed by the censors at the National Association of Electronic Media.

Another possibility that commentators are speculating on is that Hamidov drew down the ire of the authorities by writing poetry, which he published on the internet. His poems expressed profound concern for the Uzbek people, say fans of his work.

"I read his poems," said one, "They are capable of inspiring heroism."

One poem, called "What has Happened to the Uzbeks?", speaks about the hardship faced by many people in Uzbekistan, and referred to labour migration, the rise in prostitution and increasing poverty.

The international media rights group Reporters Without Borders, RSF, issued a statement on January 23 expressing concern at Hamidov's arrest.

"Two weeks after five independent journalists were summoned to the prosecutor's office for questioning about their work, President Islam Karimov's government is pursuing its offensive without fear of any reaction from the international community," said the statement.

Earlier this month, a prosecution official in Tashkent City interrogated several journalists about their work. (For more, see **Uzbek Authorities Pressure Journalists**.)

On January 23, Umida Ahmedova, a photographer and documentary filmmaker, was accused of defaming the Uzbek nation through her visual images of life in the countryside. (See **Uzbek Authorities Move Against Top Photographer**.)

Human rights groups say that there are around ten journalists serving jail terms in Uzbekistan on politically motivated charges.

RSF's 2009 Press Freedom Index lists Uzbekistan as a country where media are subject to repression.

(NBCA is an IWPR-funded project to create a multilingual news analysis and comment service for Central Asia, drawing on the expertise of a broad range of political observers across the region. The project ran from August 2006 to September 2007, covering all five regional states. With new funding, the service has resumed, covering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.)

Location: Uzbekistan

Focus: News Briefing Central Asia

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